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THE RAGGED GUARD

ALSO BY PAUL TABORI

EPITAPH FOR EUROPE

A remarkable
panorama of Europe

SNEEZE ON A MONDAY

The spy story by the
author who knows the
Nazi mind

TO THE MEMORY OF

COUNT P.T.
WHO PREFERRED DEATH
TO THE DISGRACE
OF TREACHERY

THE RAGGED GUARD

A Tale of 1941

by

PAUL TABORI

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SOME of the characters in this story are thinly disguised counterparts of actual persons. The most important of these is dead—and as for the others, their violent end is bound to coincide with the end of the present long nightmare. For details of topography I am indebted to Zsolt de Harsanyi's *Sacra Corona*, while to my most helpful friend Milivoj Sudjich I owe a considerable debt of gratitude for his confidential data on the magnificent fight of Yugoslav guerillas.

P.T.

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THE RAGGED GUARD

PART ONE

THE WIND WAS SO VIOLENT that the rain fell slantwise like a lopsided curtain. It blotted out the houses in the quiet street on the mountainside; it was so cold that the two policemen shivered in their greatcoats. Their silvery helmets glistened wetly, their white-gloved hands were hooked in their belts. On the other side of the hill the ice-floes still blocked the river; a few days ago military planes had to be sent down to Mohács and up to Szentendre to blast the thick crust which threatened with an even worse flood than the year before.

The two policemen were standing in the shadow of an overhanging porch. They were watching the house opposite. They did not speak, but both of them fidgeted a little as if they were nervous. The chauffeur of the long black car in front of the house was reading a newspaper, snug and warm behind the glass panes. The sound of running water was everywhere as small streams hurried downhill in the broad gutters.

Suddenly the two policemen stiffened. A door opened across the road and a solitary, tall figure walked along the garden path. He had almost reached the gate when the two policemen started forward. Their holsters were open and they both gripped a gun.

They were half-way across the road when the two shots rang out. One of the policemen spun round with a surprised look on his face and fell heavily. His body twitched and then he lay still. The other man grasped his left arm. He knelt down, trying to turn over his comrade who was lying on his face.

The whole scene had hardly taken more than fifteen seconds. The tall man, walking through the garden, had reached the gate and there he stopped. The chauffeur jumped from the car—but he was running towards the gate and not towards the figures in the road. Somewhere a police whistle shrilled. The kneeling policeman jerked up his head. He withdrew his fingers, sticky with blood. He straightened, turned and began to run—away from the whistle, the dead man, the car. He

was a good runner, and the rain, the gathering darkness and the turn of the sloping road swallowed him soon.

A great many things happened on that twenty-fifth day of March. It was a day of early, reluctant spring, with most of Europe still under the sway of the aftermath of winter. Snow and ice and storms raged throughout the Continent. In Canada the House of Commons passed a War Appropriations Bill which provided for one thousand three hundred million Canadian dollars. The Japanese landed at Swatow and in Honghai Bay. It was revealed that by an unsurpassed stroke of financial acumen Germany used the four hundred million francs which France had to pay for the occupation to purchase piecemeal the French steel, chemical, textile, glass, mining and other industries. In Great Britain Winston Churchill sent a message of encouragement to the Greek people, who celebrated on the same day the hundred and twentieth anniversary of their war of independence. Marshal Graziani preferred to resign, while General Antonescu declared that there will never be "real justice in the world so long as the Rumanian people do not have their wrongs righted".

The man who sat in a quiet room of the Hôtel Esplanade in Zagreb was not very much interested in this motley news. He was engaged in taking a walking-stick to pieces. It was a stout Malacca cane—but a cane the like of which no clubman had ever sported. When he pressed a button about half-way down, two segments of the stick opened and disclosed an amazingly compressed wireless set. A frame aerial emerged from the top like the feelers of a reassured snail. Instead of knobs to twirl there were tiny springs to adjust, and then a thick, guttural voice filled the air, soft like a whisper, not audible beyond a yard or so, yet crystal-clear. It spoke German with an atrocious accent and it said:

"... for the chief, and almost the only, aim of Jugoslavia is the maintenance of peace for the people and the safeguarding of their security. My Government's efforts are directed first and foremost towards the consolidation of friendly relations with our neighbours, to secure peace on the frontier and freedom, independence and unity. With Great Germany we have

had excellent relations, marked by friendship and complete confidence . . ."

The man whose walking-stick had such strange properties said rudely, "Oh, yeah?" and pressed a screw. The guttural voice with the horrible accent ceased. The man in the hotel room lay back in the armchair and began to rumple his hair, a gesture he had found conducive to hard thinking. Yet after ten minutes or so he turned once more to his versatile walking-stick. And now it was another voice which whispered into his ear, a supercilious, nasal, pseudo-Junker voice, the voice of an ex-champagne merchant and Foreign Minister of Hitler's Greater Germany:

" . . . with iron legality," it said, "here beneath our eyes to-day, in the middle of war, the new order in Europe and East Asia is being carried through. While through the statecraft and the unfolding power of our ally, Japan, the contours of the new order in East Asia . . . are becoming clearer and clearer, it has been the effort of the Axis . . . to rally the States of Europe to the idea of a new and just order . . ."

The lonely man squashed the Herr Reichminister's eloquence with a flick of his thumb. Then he replaced the aerial in the sheath of the cane and closed the small sections in the centre. It was again a smooth, well-polished cane, a little heavier perhaps than the usual variety, but with nothing conspicuous about it.

"The fools," he muttered now. "If they think they can get away with it, they are crazy. . . ."

Stephen Barrett was not given to soliloquies or talking to himself. He preferred to keep silent both in company and when alone. But he had been alone for almost six weeks now, kicking his heels in this pleasant enough yet alien town, waiting for instructions to come from a certain room in the shadow of Big Ben which did not arrive, and amusing himself by inventing new touches for his well-designed false front. The hotel register knew him as Señor Almyda, a Buenos Aires art dealer who had come to Europe to pick up some of the treasures which the *Herrenvolk* had "collected" during its triumphal march across half Europe. The Master Race was willing to give up these treasures for the currency of the despised pluto-

democracies. His passport was a perfect specimen; the signature of the Argentine Chief of Police would have deceived even that worthy gentleman himself. His luggage and his personal belongings, his suit and even his cigarettes—they were all in keeping with his assumed character. For Stephen Barrett had sent so many brave and desperate men and women to face unknown, mortal dangers that he had learned the importance of details; he remembered many a chilly dawn with the shooting squad and the harsh command which ended the promising career of an agent, slipping up on some insignificant trifle. His hair was iron-grey, but his small black moustache was a thin line like a Latin's. His dark blue eyes spoiled this effect a little—but they were balanced by the ripe mahogany of his face and strong wrists.

There was a knock at the door and a page-boy in a uniform overloaded with multi-coloured braid came in, carrying a small envelope on a brass tray.

"A telegram for Gospodin Almyda," he said.

"Thank you, son." The pseudo-art dealer smiled and flipped a coin which the boy caught deftly. "Can you do the back *salto* yet?"

"No, *gospodin*," confessed the boy sadly. "But I am practising."

"That's the spirit! You keep it up and one day you'll be making big money!"

Six weeks in the same hotel would be sufficient for any kindly human being to find out a great deal about the staff and the guests. But in Stephen Barrett's case it was not exactly the milk of human kindness which made him friendly to lift-boys, waiters and receptionists, which forced him to scrutinize his fellow-guests unobtrusively but none the less carefully. He found out that the day switchboard girl dreamed of going one day to Italy, that the page-boy wanted to become an acrobat, and that Dragutin, the head-waiter, owned a race-horse. He possessed an astonishing amount of information about the hundred-odd people under the buff-coloured roof of the Hôtel Esplanade.

But now he tore open the flap of the cable impatiently. At last! His instructions from London could only mean that he

would see action. Was it Germany, Poland, Turkey or Iraq? He did not care as long as he could get moving.

He scanned the few lines quickly. It was a perfectly innocent telegram about pictures and painters, import duties and auctions. It had been handed in at the G.P.O., Budapest, two and a half hours ago. Apparently the censor found nothing suspicious about it. Yet the same censor would have been horrified if he had seen the things Stephen Barrett proceeded to do to the telegram. He ignored the interesting information about the Rubens in Vienna and the possibility of acquiring a fine Franz Hals from an S.S. Colonel stationed in Warsaw. Instead he put the words into one column underneath each other and took the fourth and fifth letters of each word. The result was rather disappointing—a jumble of vowels and consonants until he turned it round. Then—and the Budapest censor would have given a year's salary to be present—he read it through, separating the words as he went along:

"I. V. V. Almyda, Hôtel Esplanade, Zagreb

MEET ME TWO SIXTH PM CHAMPAGNE BATH BUDAPEST HELL
BUST MUST HELP RAGGED GUARD CAN'T ACCEPT REFUSAL

PADDY."

Stephen Barrett stared for a long time at the telegram. Then he crumpled it up together with his notes and watched it turn into ashes in the small ashtray. He washed the ashes down the basin in his bathroom. Returning to the bedroom, he took up the receiver of the telephone and asked for the head-porter.

"Andrija? Señor Almyda here. I am afraid I have to leave this afternoon. No, not Rome. Budapest. Would you please reserve a seat for me? No, I am taking care of the visa myself. Thanks. And, Andrija . . . I hope Dragutin's horse wins to-morrow. I'm sorry I won't be here to watch it come in first. But I think I'll leave the money with you—and if it wins you can share it with the others. . . ."

While he was packing, he whistled. It was a South American tango—for Barrett was a careful man. Yet he would have preferred "Lily of Laguna".

Yes, many things happened on that twenty-fifth of March

when two Yugoslav statesmen journeyed to Vienna to sell their country to the devil. Messrs. Tsvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch were not at their best during the ceremony. Vienna was a friendly city—but they were not sure whether Belgrade would be so friendly after their return. Still, a share in this wonderful New Order was worth many a risk—and Germany was certain to win the war as soon as Britain had been starved out. Herr Ribbentrop and his *entourage* had presented most conclusive proof to that effect. Also, Germany and Italy were near—Britain was far away and at bay. Then there was Hungary . . . true, a pact of eternal friendship had been signed not so long ago between the two countries, but . . . did not the Hungarians covet the fat plains of the Bachka, the fields of Croatia, perhaps even Susak? No, it was better to be on the right side of this new and powerful Demon which had arisen to lord it over Europe. . . .

Stephen Barrett had spent the night before the twenty-fifth of March teaching an Italian colonel and a Serb pig-exporter how to play poker. They paid for the lesson quite well. The "policeman" who was shot in the quiet street of Buda spent it on a slab in the Budapest morgue. Messrs. Tsvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch spent it in the train from Belgrade to Vienna, and their dreams were not too pleasant. Thousands of Greeks spent it crouching behind icy rocks in the Albanian mountains—and the good people of Berlin spent it in their air-raid shelters while British bombs blasted the centre of their capital. All over the world diplomats and politicians, military leaders and air-raid wardens kept awake, burdened with the responsibilities of their tasks. And in the Hôtel Dunapalota three men were spending it behind locked doors and drawn blinds, drinking Magyar *barack* and smoking Dutch cigars.

The three men were dissimilar in age, appearance and manner. One of them looked and behaved like an aristocrat, which he obviously was—a man of tall stature, clear-cut features, carefully trimmed moustache, his hair severely brushed from his forehead. He spoke in the clipped accents of the Prussian Junker. The second was a tall, thin fellow with a mobile and almost attractive face, marred a little by a short scar on his left temple. His voice was soft, sibilant, his

pronunciation that of a Slav German. The third in this strange circle was a thick-set, ox-like man with a ruddy face and close-cropped, fair hair; his hands were enormous, yet his fingers tapering and sensitive. He seemed to be afflicted by some throat trouble as his voice was hoarse and low, but he spoke in a broad Bavarian dialect.

"Are you quite sure, Schwarzwolf?" the tall, aristocratic man asked.

"Quite sure, Your Excellency," replied the fellow with the scar. "Hofbauer was killed by the Ragged Guard. The inspector who handled the case is . . . in close contact with one of my men. They found *this* on him . . . or at least a few yards from his body. . . ."

"*This*" was a small white scrap of linen—not bigger than a man's palm, with uneven, ragged edges. Schwarzwolf held it up and then tried to tear it savagely. But it was strong stuff and would not tear. He tossed it into the waste-paper basket and continued:

"Liebermann is out of action for a few weeks—his left elbow was broken by a bullet. Lucky that he got away. It would have been awkward—with their policeman's uniform . . ."

"I told you it was a crazy plan!" interrupted the man whom the other had addressed as His Excellency. "After all, we have not yet occupied Hungary. We are allies and friends and so on . . . and to put your men into the uniform of the Hungarian police . . ."

"What else could I do?" Schwarzwolf defended himself. "I knew that this accursed Ragged Guard was watching us. It seemed the safest method. And Baron Budai would be dead if . . ."

"Yes, but he is not dead, Schwarzwolf. And even if your inspector friend could cover up the whole affair, you have lost two of your best men. This cannot go on. We must be prepared for every eventuality. You know what failure means—for all of us."

"I know, Your Excellency," the thin man nodded. "And I don't want to fail. We cannot deal with the Ragged Guard as we wish while this damned fool of a professor heads the Hungarian Government. We must force him to resign. And

there is only one way to do it . . . the way which I proposed several times before but which you vetoed every time. . . ."

Though they were alone in the room and the doors were locked, the aristocrat lowered his voice:

"You mean . . . the crown . . . ?"

"Yes, the crown!" answered Schwarzwolf almost fiercely. "We have prepared everything. Marjai is in our hands—he must dance to our tune. Lepke here"—he nodded towards the thick-set, sturdy man—"has the keys ready—Marjai brought us the wax impressions a fortnight ago. Lepke and Oldenburg are ready at a moment's notice to carry out the job. But I must have your authorization . . ."

"You know that it isn't only the crown," the other man interrupted again. "What about the Guardians? You must time it carefully. . . ."

"We never had a better opportunity," Schwarzwolf said. "Baron Budai and Count Kalnoki are expected to meet to-night at the coming-out party of Budai's daughter. I have my men posted and I would take charge of the final arrangements myself. By to-morrow morning we could have the Ragged Guard and that stupid Prime Minister in the hollow of our hands. . . . Your Excellency, I beg you to give me the word to proceed. . . ."

The tall, aristocratic man stared at him for a long time. Schwarzwolf stood his stare without flinching. Then His Excellency Freiherr Börries von Lieven laughed. It was a high-pitched, almost hysterical laugh.

"You know, Schwarzwolf, sometimes I am frightened. Frightened and bewildered. This is rather like a Hans Heinz Ewers story—in very bad taste. Here we are sitting, three servants of the Fuehrer, discussing murder and burglary—two murders and one unique burglary—calmly and soberly as if we were planning a new trade agreement or a *Gastspiel* of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. You propose to murder two men at whose tables I have eaten, whose wine I have drunk, whose partridges I have shot. You propose to steal the . . ."

"But, Your Excellency, it is not the means but the end. Forgive me for the trite argument—but we know why we are doing it."

The tall man rose.

"Do we? Sometimes I wonder. Are you sure that you can squash this crazy organization . . . these Ragged Guards . . . by killing these two men and staging that robbery?"

"I am sure, Your Excellency."

Freiherr von Lieven turned and shrugged.

"You must love the Fatherland very much, Schwarzwolf. I am sure the Fuehrer will reward such loyalty well. All right . . . go ahead. I must get back to the Legation. Keep me posted . . . but don't wake me unless it's absolutely necessary. And I don't want to know anything about the . . . about the details."

The two men watched him put on his fur coat in silence. He waved to them with his walking-stick, unlocked the door and walked into the hotel corridor. The moment the door closed behind him, Schwarzwolf jumped from his chair and rushed to the telephone. He dialled a number, waited, then spoke:

"Colonel? I must see you at once. No, I don't care what you are doing. It's only ten o'clock. I am expecting you within half an hour. Yes, at the Dunapalota. The usual place. Don't be late."

He put down the receiver. There was a fierce joy on his face, the joy of a man who sees his long-prepared plans come to fruition. Then he turned to the man with the ruddy face and said:

"Now listen, Heinrich . . . there must be no mistake. Have you everything ready? The uniforms . . . the gas . . . the rest of the stuff? Well then, first of all . . ."

The rain had stopped, but it was still very cold. It was cold north of Aaos where the Italians unsuccessfully tried to machine-gun Greek positions; cold over the Tripolitanian desert where British bombers returned from blasting Tamet and Sirte. Mr. Matsuoka must have felt the cold as his train carried him across Poland on the last lap from Moscow to Berlin.

The tall, erect figure in uniform who walked across the square of St. George in Buda had turned up the collar of his cloak. It was a minute or so after half-past eleven; the

clock of the Coronation Church had struck the half-hour when he had left his car close to the terminus of the funicular which connected the Danube embankment and the Palace Hill. It was cold—yet Colonel Marjai of the Royal Hungarian Crown Guard was sweating. He walked through the moonlit square and paused for a moment to look up at the bronze statue of the Dragon-Killer. But his eyes did not rest on the heroic figure, flexing his arm to push his lance into the writhing body of the monster. He was staring at the dragon, whose eyes glittered in the moonlight with a most baleful look. For a long second the tall, soldierly figure remained motionless, as if defying the power of evil personified by the mass of bronze. Then he shrugged and his shoulders sagged. Slowly, like an old or sick man, he crossed the square.

A sharp command cut through the night like the flash of a sword. Rifles slid with perfect precision from burly shoulders; straight in line with chin and centre of forehead the guard of the Royal Palace presented arms. But Colonel Marjai did not pause. He hurried across the small courtyard and vanished through the side-door of the palace.

Inside he walked along the ground-floor corridor until he came to a staircase. He climbed it slowly, at the same time turning down the collar of his military cloak and putting his stiff cap at a more regular angle. On the second floor he turned to the right. It was a long corridor with small windows on one side and a seemingly endless series of white doors on the other. Half-way along it the Colonel paused and pressed a bell. There was no door-knob on this door, only a small, brass-framed spy-hole—and after a few moments this opened, showing a pair of keen brown eyes.

“Who is it?”

“Colonel Marjai,” the officer replied.

“The password, Colonel?”

“St. Emery.”

The white door opened. Inside there was a room like any other guard-room in Central Europe, sparsely furnished with a table, a cupboard, a couple of benches and four chairs. But in the background two soldiers stood at attention, fully armed, their rifles at the alert. The corporal who had opened the door

made his report in a swift monotone:

"Corporal Kis reporting. One corporal, two privates on night duty. Alarm and telephone tested. No visitors."

The officer nodded.

"At ease, corporal. I was a little worried about the alarms. The Maintenance Office telephoned that one of their electricians had found a faulty connection. I thought I would come along and test it. . . ."

The corporal saluted and put his two men "at ease". He was a simple-minded but not unintelligent man of peasant stock in his early thirties; and though discipline was deeply ingrained in his soul, he could not help wondering. Within three weeks Colonel Marjai had visited the guard-room twice with an excuse which somehow seemed to be flimsy and illogical. This alarm business—Corporal Kis himself could have tested it if he had received a telephone message. Of course, the officers of the Crown Guard, a small, highly trained body of men, were not like ordinary regimental C.O.s—they made inspections more frequently and took a closer interest in their men. . . . But here again Corporal Kis was wondering. For many months past Colonel Marjai had left the night inspections to the two captains and three lieutenants who were on the same special duty. And now, suddenly, twice within three weeks! Standing at a respectful distance, the corporal fixed his large brown eyes on the tall figure of the Colonel and waited.

Colonel Marjai took a flat gold case from his trouser pocket, selected a cigarette and looked around. The corporal hastened to provide a match. There was silence in the spacious, rather shabby room. The officer went to the window but outside the darkness was impenetrable, the moon suddenly hidden behind a thick layer of clouds. The wind rattled the panes. He turned and walked to the white door on the left side of the room. It was an ordinary door except that it had no knob and that there were three key-holes set in the centre of it. When the Colonel turned, his sabre touched one of the panels and there was a metallic clang. It was a steel or iron door, the door of a strong-room. On the right, nearer to the entrance from the corridor, there was a square window let into the strong-room walls, with heavy bars. Marjai glanced through it. There

was not very much to see inside: walls painted white, a semi-circular table on which something was spread out under brown paper sheets; a simple glass-fronted cabinet with shelves—the latter piled with documents, carefully tied with red-white-green tape; a small iron chest on the left . . . and in the centre a wooden dais with a fairly large iron box on it. The box was smooth, undecorated, but braced with iron staves. It was criss-crossed with string and on its top there was a big white sheet of paper fastened with seals to the string. On the side of the box a series of padlocks, five in a row, was hanging down.

The Colonel went to the telephone on the wall, seemed about to lift the receiver, thought better of it and returned to the centre of the room. The corporal still stood in respectful silence. But suddenly he raised his head. Someone was ringing the bell—someone was asking for admittance. Who could it be? Another officer? Or . . . no, the guard would not be relieved before six a.m.

Corporal Kis glanced at his colonel. Marjai motioned him to go to the door. His face looked strange, strained. Though the room was not hot, beads of sweat stood on his forehead. The corporal walked to the door. The two soldiers stood impassively.

Corporal Kis opened the spy-hole. There was a soft, plopping noise and he fell back, shot through the forehead. His wide-open eyes were glazed in amazement. He died before he had solved the question of his death—mystified for all eternity.

The two soldiers moved forward simultaneously. They evidently counted on their colonel to use the telephone or press the button of the alarm. But the door to the corridor swung open and a small, hissing object was thrown on the floor. The soldiers staggered like drunken marionettes. They turned towards the window but found their way barred by their own superior officer. They opened their lips to scream but no sound came. The thick, greyish haze which filled the room quickly choked them into immobility. They fell, close to Marjai, who was now also lying on the floor, unconscious.

The door opened wider. Two figures entered, snouted, Martian apparitions in large service gas-masks. One of them

opened the door as wide as he could, the other silently unfastened a window on the corridor. The clear, cold night air rushed in and the fumes began to clear rapidly. One of the figures quickly bent over the two soldiers and jabbed a hypodermic into each left arm. By that time his companion had closed the door and was busy with the strong-room door next to the barred window. The keys he produced were not easy to turn and he had to use a pair of pincers. Both men worked swiftly, but unhurriedly and methodically, as if going through a set of prearranged and carefully rehearsed motions. Though the first man had turned the keys in the inner door he did not open it. With a pair of wire-cutters he disconnected the alarm and cut the telephone line. Only then did the two men enter the second room. They lifted the iron chest from the dais and, staggering under the heavy load, carried it to the outside room, placing it on the table. The flame of a strangely compact, heatless blow-lamp darted like the tongue of a snake into the dim, hazy air. It took less than ten minutes to cut out the iron around the intricate series of locks. The lid was lifted. One of the men reached into the chest, pushed aside some draperies, groped for the object he wanted, lifted it, wrapped it in a large piece of velvet and thrust the bulky bundle into a haversack hanging from his side.

They carried the iron chest back to its original place, locked the inner door and stood for a moment on the threshold of the corridor. They had both removed their masks; there was hardly any trace of gas in the room by now. The Colonel stirred.

"What about him?" asked the man who had handled the blow-lamp.

"Oh, leave him where he is," the other man said. "He is a fool and Karl told us not to bother about him."

Before they left the room they put over their uniforms the long, voluminous cloaks which were worn by members of the Crown Guard only. They walked down the stairs to the ground floor and made their way to a small door in the palace wall. Before they slipped out they took a look around, but the square was deserted and no one challenged them. . . .

At five a.m. on that fateful twenty-fifth day of March the

telephone rang at the bedside of Freiherr Börries von Lieven, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Third Reich. He had been dozing, tully clothed, on his bed. Now he reached out a languid hand for the receiver.

"Your Excellency?" the sibilant whisper of Schwarzwolf came over the wire. "I am glad to say that your instructions have been carried out. Lepke has just returned. Oldenburg is leaving for Vienna with the early morning train. There were no complications and . . ."

"What about the other business?" enquired His Excellency. "You promised not to bother me with details, but I want to . . ."

"I don't think, Your Excellency, that even this private line is quite safe. But I understand that two . . . accidents happened shortly after midnight. Both were fatal. The police are investigating the matter. The Prime Minister has already been notified. Inspector H. 'phoned me at half-past two. He seems to have had some trouble with a young man and a girl . . . relations of the victims of the accidents . . . but he doesn't foresee any serious difficulty."

There was a slight pause. Freiherr von Lieven was staring into the darkness of his bedroom. He shivered a little. Then he spoke:

"Thank you, Schwarzwolf. You are most efficient. I expect you to let me have Lepke's . . . acquisition . . . to-night. . . ."

"But, Your Excellency . . ."

"I have changed my mind. I am going to Bucharest myself. We cannot take any risks. . . ."

He sensed that Schwarzwolf was about to protest again and he put down the receiver. Then he got up, switched on the lights in the spacious room and walked to the dressing-table. He sat down facing the mirror and stared a long time at his own reflection. Then, with a sudden gesture of rage and disgust, he snatched up a brush and flung it against the mirror. It broke into jagged splinters.

Freiherr Börries von Lieven buried his head in his arms. His shoulders shook. But no one could have told whether it was laughter or despair which shook his body.

Stephen Barrett slipped a hundred-dinar note into the hand of the ticket-collector. The broad-faced Slavonian smiled and assured him that he could have the first-class compartment to himself until they reached the frontier at Kelebia. Of course, after that he would have to make his arrangements with the Hungarian railwaymen—but he could assure the *gospodin* they were very reasonable and a five-pengő piece would be ample.

Barrett nodded and settled down himself in the corner near the window. He had a stack of newspapers and was looking forward to spend a few quiet hours reading and thinking. He liked to straighten out things in his mind before he decided on any action, though there was nothing deliberate about him once he got going. This telegram from Budapest had given him little time for consideration. It came from Paddy—Patrick Oliver Flaherty—a six-foot-three Irish-American who represented an important chain of U.S.A. newspapers in Central Europe. “Paddy” had a second job of which very few people knew—perhaps no one outside that certain building in Whitehall and another, somewhat more pretentious house in Washington which harboured the G-2 Branch of the American General Staff. To almost everybody else Paddy was a hard-drinking, hard-working Irishman who kept his choicest adjectives of abuse for the British and seemed to be violently anti-New Deal. Barrett had worked with him once or twice in the past and learned to respect his cool courage and shrewd judgment. The only trouble with Paddy was that sometimes he proved too impetuous—like the proverbial bull in a whole department store of china. And now this cryptic message about the Ragged Guard. What the hell was the Ragged Guard, anyhow? He searched his mind, but did not find any clue. . . . There used to be an organization called Ragged Guard, anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, in the early nineteen-twenties in Hungary. But surely Paddy would not ask his help for such a group of fanatics and extremists? Stephen Barrett shrugged. In five hours he would be in Budapest—just in time to meet Paddy in the afternoon. In the meantime he might as well look at the newspapers.

Mhmm . . . these German papers weren't half gloating

over the Yugoslav business. "Yugoslavia reached her decision after calm and prolonged reflection," bleated the *Börsen Zeitung*, "uninfluenced by Anglo-Saxon bluff . . . England has suffered another diplomatic Dunkirk; it will not be the last." Stephen turned to the *Völkischer Beobachter*. ". . . neither the methods of the British nor the crude and extravagant politics of Mr. Roosevelt are able to prevent the war from reaching its climax," roared Dr. Goebbels' pet lion . . . or was it only a hyena?

Stephen Barrett flung away the newspapers and lit a cigarette. The train was passing over a bridge and slowing down. They stopped along a low and white station building. Doors opened; Yugoslav customs officers boarded the train to examine the travellers' luggage. They were accompanied by members of the frontier police who checked the passports. They stopped only for a short time in the compartment occupied by Stephen Barrett; and he was relieved though not surprised to find that his passport stood up to the first official scrutiny. The Yugoslavs seemed to be almost absent-minded, and Stephen had to remind them that they forgot to stamp his visa. The plain-clothes man looked at him, and Barrett was startled to see that his eyes were red-rimmed as if he had been crying.

"You seem to be distraught, *gospodin*," he risked an opening gambit.

The man was alone with him in the compartment—the others had passed on towards the end of the train—and suddenly he lost his composure. He was young and his face puckered in pain.

"It's a bad business," he muttered. "They came back—but did not dare to leave their train at the Belgrade Main Station; they got out in the suburbs. There is rioting in Sarajevo and Banjaluka. And the police would not use their weapons in Kragujevac when the crowd came to blows with them. . . . They shouldn't have done it . . . they shouldn't have done it. . . ."

Shaking his head, he left the compartment. He was so occupied with his thoughts that he took Stephen's passport with himself and Barrett had to run after him to retrieve it.

Stephen returned to his place, a thoughtful frown on his

forehead. So "they"—he knew well that "they" were Messrs. Tsvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch—tried to sneak into the Serbian capital after signing the Tripartite Pact. And there were riots . . . naturally against the pact. . . . He hesitated for a moment whether he should not return to Zagreb or go to Belgrade. But no, Paddy knew his business. If he had sent for him it was evidently with the knowledge and approval of London. But trouble was brewing in Yugoslavia and Hungary might be involved. . . . Stephen was still hesitating when the train began to move again, rattling slowly into a strip of no-man's-land. In a few minutes they would be in Hungary.

It was then that he became aware of the drunk. He had stopped in front of the compartment and pressed his face against the window. It was a large, brown face and its owner was wavering on his feet, swaying with more than the movement of the train. Then he tore open the door and stood on the threshold, unsteady, exuding a penetrating smell of alcohol.

"Excuse me, sir . . ." he began in German, "could you lend me a comb?"

He certainly needed a comb; his lank hair hung into his eyes and was just as unkempt as his whole person. Still, it was not a request one usually addressed to a perfect stranger. While Barrett debated whether he should get up, the drunk lurched forward and fell. He sprawled at his feet on the floor of the compartment, evidently dead to the world.

Barrett bent down, half automatically, to turn him on his back and see what first aid he could offer, when a voice, clipped, precise, cold, spoke from the door:

"Put up your hands!"

He swung round. A man stood in the door, his collar turned up, a gun in his hand. Behind him a second, smaller figure blocked the corridor. And now the drunk sat up suddenly and produced another gun. He seemed to be perfectly sober and Barrett cursed himself silently for falling a victim to such a clumsy trick. But then he had been sure that no one knew of his presence on this particular train, which he had been careful to board a few miles beyond Zagreb. He raised his hands.

"Get up!" the man in the door said. "Come on . . . hurry!"

Barrett obeyed. His captors made him pass along the corridor to the door of the carriage. When they reached it, one man moved up behind him, while the other two covered the corridor. The train was moving very slowly now. The fields which stretched alongside the track were deserted, nor were there any buildings in sight.

"Jump!" said the man who had spoken first.

Stephen Barrett hesitated for a moment. Then he jumped—well to the left, in the opposite direction to which the train was moving. He flexed his muscles and reached the ground without falling or stumbling. He glanced back. Two of the three men had landed on their knees, the third was still hanging on to the door. In this brief time the train had moved along and Barrett was now abreast with the second door of the carriage. He jumped again—but this time to catch the handle of the door. He landed on the steps. A shot rang out and the bullet whistled close to his head. He took a good hold of the rail on the side of the carriage, reached through the mercifully open window and managed to open the door. It swung outside, and he managed to get into the corridor of the train just when the second bullet flattened against the framework of the door, a couple of inches from his head. He pressed himself against the wall. There were two more shots, but by that time the train had moved some distance. Stephen did not pause but rushed along the corridor. There was no trace of the third man—the drunk . . . apparently he had joined the others. Nor could he see any of them—they had probably vanished in the dense undergrowth which lined here the embankment.

He returned to his compartment. His luggage was still on the rack. He sat down and took a deep breath, realizing that it had been a very close shave. But who were his attackers? He wished he could answer his own question. There was something strange about their German pronunciation—no, they were certainly not Germans, at least not Prussians. The few words had not been sufficient to judge their nationality. Serbian? Magyar? But before Stephen could ponder this

problem, the train had reached Gyékényes, the Hungarian frontier station. A man in a raincoat and a bowler looked at his passport, another asked the amount of money he was importing, while two customs officials made a thorough examination of his suitcases, which they found innocent of any contraband. Then they were gone; Stephen made his bargain with the Hungarian ticket-collector about retaining his privacy, and after ten minutes the train moved on again.

Stephen slipped into the corridor and walked the length of the train. He was not surprised when in one of the third-class compartments he discovered his old friend, the drunk. He seemed to be asleep. But Barrett decided to take no more risks.

The Hôtel St. Gellert was named after the first holy bishop of Hungary whom some rude pagan Magyars had rolled down the steep mountainside into the Danube. They used a barrel for this purpose—a barrel spiked inside with three-inch nails—and the saint died a nasty but glorious death.

About nine hundred years later the City of Budapest decided to build a large hotel combined with a sanatorium to exploit the medicinal springs which the rocky soil of Buda possessed in great profusion. The architect whom they entrusted with the important task must have been an eclectic and a man somewhat uncertain about his own intentions. The result was a strange blend of Byzantine and Gothic, with huge cupolas, a Roman front and Norman arches. But if from the outside the hotel looked like a super-colossal nightmare of a Hollywood stage designer, inside it was modern, well heated, superbly furnished and extremely comfortable. People who came here to be cured of rheumatism and various other ailments stayed on to enjoy the newly won freedom of their limbs. In summer they could splash about in the "artificial wave-bath" where every hour huge waves swept across the pool for ten minutes; in winter they could refresh themselves in the indoor pool which was fed by several bubbling springs. The water of these springs contained some chemical elements which made it effervescent, almost like soda-water or—champagne. If a Hungarian has to choose between soda-water and champagne,

he invariably chooses the latter—so this pool was called the “Champagne Bath”. In a big hall supported by malachite columns, with a peristyle which was equipped with ultra-violet lamps and comfortable armchairs, the “Champagne Bath” shone like a gigantic emerald. Around it comfortable wicker chairs stood with small tables, and one could have tea in the gallery while watching the swimmers. Truly a place to linger and laze, forget the inclemency of the weather outside the thick walls—for here it was eternal summer.

Stephen Barrett arrived at twenty minutes past twelve. He took a suite on the fifth floor as befitting an important South American art dealer. He lunched in his room and asked for the latest edition of the *Pester Lloyd*, the German language daily of Budapest which was the organ of the Hungarian Foreign Office.

While he ate excellent chicken soup, a superb portion of goose liver, a generous helping of pancakes and drank a carafe of smooth *badacsonyi kéknyelű*, he scanned the paper. The leader welcomed Yugoslavia “in the brotherhood of the New Order”. The Foreign Secretary, M. de Bardossy, might go to Belgrade to discuss “matters of mutual interest”. The daily news were not very interesting—until he came to two obituary notices which occupied almost a whole page.

Barrett read them carefully. “Count Stephen Kalnoki . . . died with tragic suddenness . . . his deeply bereaved nephew and adopted son . . . his friends and tenants . . . decorations . . . president of . . . *ætate* 73 . . . Guardian of the Crown . . . former Hungarian Delegate to the League of Nations . . . K.C.B. . . .”

And the other: “Baron Bela Budai . . . at the age of forty-six . . . member of the Upper House . . . former Commissioner for Flood Relief and Re-housing . . . Guardian of the Crown . . . his daughter, Baroness Eve Budai . . . sudden death . . .”

He had another look at the “Deaths” which were printed on the same page. Various names, little shopkeepers, clerks, a journalist and here . . . Colonel Marjai . . . of the Crown Guard . . .

All three had died on the night before . . . all three had passed away "suddenly".

What were the Guardians of the Crown? Damn it, his knowledge of the Hungarian Constitution was not exactly encyclopædic. He wondered what the difference between the Guardians and the Crown Guard was. It seemed strange that all three men who had some sort of connection with the "Crown"—what was this Crown, anyhow?—died at the same time. Or were their deaths only announced on the same day? No, apparently they had actually died the night before . . . the night when he was teaching two innocent victims how to play poker . . . the night on which Messrs. Tsvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch were travelling back to Belgrade. . . .

He would have pondered this strange problem longer, but he looked at his watch and saw that it was half-past two. Paddy would be probably waiting for him, and if the matter was so serious every minute wasted was a dead loss.

Stephen assured himself that he had some Hungarian money in his pockets and left his room. When he walked towards the lift, a door opened a few yards farther along the corridor and a man stepped through it. He and Barrett stared at each other. In spite of his smooth-shaven face and well-combed hair Stephen recognized him instantly. It was the drunken fellow from the train. Without hesitation he addressed him:

"I hope you have completely recovered," he said in German. But the other man just stared at him without speaking and then turned back into his room. Barrett shrugged, but he was careful to notice the number and position. At least he knew where his enemy lived—or rather, he amended his thought, one of his enemies.

It was only when he had bought his ticket for the "Champagne Bath" in the big, empty hall that Barrett remembered his lack of a bathing costume. Beyond the swinging doors he found a counter piled high with red and blue trunks and towels. Stephen selected one, but he noticed that the attendant was watching him with rather more interest than a casual customer would incite. He endured the scrutiny calmly and asked for a big towel. The man handed it to him and at the

same time slipped a folded note into his hand. Barrett took it without looking at it or betraying any surprise. When he was alone in his little booth with the mirror and the advertisement for Törley champagne he unfolded the note. But it was in Magyar and he could not make head or tail of it. Well, Paddy spoke the lingo and he could help him. He changed quickly and emerged from his booth. Walking down the marble stairs to the pool which lay, a dark-green, unbroken mirror under the dazzling arc-lights, he dived in. He hoped that Paddy would not be too long—but in the meantime a swim would be refreshing. He swam two lengths with a swift, strong crawl, then turned on his back and floated with closed eyes.

Suddenly someone jumped on his head. A heavy body pressed him under the water; he lost his balance and struck out blindly. When he came up for air, a red head appeared close to his, a wet face, split by a wide grin, was thrust at him and a voice, used more to bellowing than to whispering, muttered hoarsely:

"Go up to the Turkish Bath and ask for Furka, the masseur. I'll be along."

"O.K.," whispered Barrett. "Did you have to jump on my head, you banshee?"

"I chose your least valuable part," the grinning face answered, and Paddy pushed himself off the wall of the pool in one mighty heave.

Stephen climbed from the water, shook himself and wrapped his body in the big towel. A sign in four languages pointed to the staircase and the Turkish Bath. He walked up, entering a large room full of steamy heat. An attendant came forward to meet him.

"Is Furka free?" asked Barrett in German.

"I think so," the attendant answered. "Third door on the left."

His hand slid forward as if he wanted to shake Barrett's. Stephen held out his without hesitation. A slip of paper. He glanced around, saw a welcome sign, and was locked up the next moment in the lavatory. There he unrolled the tiny cylinder.

This, too, was in Hungarian. But his photographic memory remembered the text of the first which he had left in the dressing-booth, hidden in the turn-ups of his trousers. Unless he was very much mistaken, it was the same message, word for word.

He almost laughed out loud. Someone must be very anxious to get this message to him. But why to him? Didn't they know that his Hungarian was restricted to a few words? Perhaps . . . perhaps it was all a mistake and he had received these slips of paper—instead of the lawful recipient. . . . This opened up intriguing possibilities, but he realized that Paddy might be waiting for him and so he left his convenient hiding-place.

When he got to the third door on the left, an enormous man was standing on the threshold. His bulging body was clad in a singlet and a pair of white trousers, his naked feet thrust into straw slippers. He was bald; his small eyes almost completely lost in folds of flesh. But his arms carried pure muscle without an ounce of fat.

"You wanted me, *mein Herr*?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd like to have a good work-out. My muscles are rather stiff," explained Stephen.

"Come right in, sir," the mountainous masseur said politely. "I am expecting another gentleman very soon, but in the meantime I can give you a little time."

Stephen watched him warily, wondering whether he, too, would slip him a note, but the imperturbable Furka showed no sign of acting as a messenger. He closed the door behind his client, and Barrett stretched himself on the table with a sigh of resignation. He hated massage, and Paddy knew it. It was just the thing to appeal to the newspaperman's robust sense of humour—to force him into enduring the indignity of being pummelled and pounded by a mountain of flesh. Not that Paddy ever did anything without a very good reason, and if Furka was to be trusted, this was certainly a good place for an incognito meeting. Gentlemen clad in a bath-towel and stretched flat on their stomachs offered singularly few marks of identification even if they were somewhat vulnerable to armed assault. And so, while Furka's strong hands beat a

tattoo on his thighs, Stephen Barrett relaxed.

He did not open his eyes when he heard Paddy's voice close to his ear. The Irishman must have occupied the next torture-table, but Furka went on imperturbably. The walls and the door were padded; apparently the St. Gellert believed that its massage-clients should suffer in silence and privacy.

"Hello, Casanova, how are the girls?"

It was an accepted convention between the two that Barrett was the great lover, with a girl in every city—and Paddy played the variations of this subject with great skill, professing in turn envy, moral indignation, solicitude for his friend's salvation, and all the appropriate emotions.

"Very well, thank you," answered Barrett, half automatically continuing the game, as if they had met only yesterday for the last time and not six months ago. "They send you their collective love. How's tricks?"

"Lousy. There's too much happening here and there and everywhere."

"I always knew you were bone-lazy, Paddy, but I never heard you complaining about too many scoops."

"Honest, Lothario, I am getting fed-up. A new crisis every day or so, a covey of assorted rumours every hour. I wish my paper would send me to some South Sea island for a change—or that your old man would give me a vacation."

"'There's no discharge in the war', old chap. I know that you are bursting with news and prophecies. I am prepared for the worst. Shoot."

"I tell you, Romeo, this is serious. The Serbs are not going to stand for the hanky-panky their two greasy quislings started in Vienna. The Yugoslav press was not allowed to publish the terms of the agreement which dealt with the passage of war material through the country. The Fourteenth Infantry Regiment has mutinied. Gavrilovitch, Minister in Moscow, resigned . . ."

"But surely they know that if they try to get out now, it's sheer suicide. What can they do?"

"You would be surprised."

"Don't be so cryptic, Paddy. . . . Ouch . . . tell your friend to be more gentle. I am not a piece of concrete."

"Only from the neck up. Furka is a lamb. He wouldn't hurt a fly—much. But what I mean, my Gil Blas, is that you have been all this time in Zagreb and wasted your precious hours watching the legs of the girls on the Ilitza. Does nobody ever tell you anything? "

"Not in the way you do, Blarney Stone. But why all this excitement? "

"Did you see a Budapest paper to-day? "

"Yes. What about it? "

"Did you see the . . . "

" . . . the obituaries? I did. And I thought you might enlighten me. Why this sudden increase of mortality among the Hungarian aristocrats? And what is a Guardian of the Crown? "

"You are sharp, aren't you? The two Guardians were bumped off. One of them made to look like suicide—but even your Uncle Paddy smelled something funny. On top of it Colonel Marjai of the Crown Guard shot himself."

"All very interesting. But why did you send for me? "

"I don't know."

Stephen sat up suddenly. His head came into violent contact with Furka's stomach. Furka did not flinch, but Stephen rubbed an aching head.

"Paddy! Stop acting the dizzy fool! "

"I am not fooling, my Valentino. At the ungodly hour of six a.m. to-day I was called to the private house of a certain gentleman. We'd better omit his name—Furka hates the Germans and doesn't speak English, but he might talk in his sleep. That certain gentleman is very high up in this country and he fancies us more than the paper-hanger with the Chaplin moustache. But his life wouldn't be worth a farthing if anyone were to suspect this. I give you three guesses, but don't tell me."

"All right, I won't. And I am not guessing. What did he want? "

"He informed me that the abovesaid three gentlemen had died—suddenly and violently. Evidently the police were working on the case but not getting any forrader. And they wanted action, urgent action. If things go contrary to Schickl-

gruber's wishes in Jugoslavia, Hungary will be in a very ugly position. You may remember, my Boccaccio, that they have signed a pact of eternal friendship with the Serbs not so long ago. He didn't give me all the details, our anonymous friend, and there is much I don't know. But I knew at once what he needed. You."

"But how on earth did he know . . ."

"He didn't. He wanted a man who could undertake something pretty important and dangerous and who wasn't known to every Himmler-boy in Hungary like yours truly. For the moment I am just being watched with grave disapproval. They are not yet sure of my guilty secret. But it took me two hours to get to this highly placed gentleman's hide-out in the Buda mountains because I had to throw them off my trail without their noticing that I was trying to. So—what could be more natural than calling upon you, my Bluebeard?"

"And you did it on your own responsibility?"

"Listen to the man! Had I time to bother about red tape? Like hell I hadn't! I simply could not get on to your old man. It's urgent, I tell you."

"But what is it?"

"God, you are dense to-day, little Henry the Eighth. I don't know. It's something to do with the murders. *And* with their Holy Crown. He wouldn't tell me."

Furka had ceased his ministrations and Stephen rolled over. He lifted himself on one elbow and stared at the Irishman.

"Well, it seems that you have made a fool of me, Paddy. And I shudder to think what might happen if the old man wanted me in Zagreb and couldn't find me there. In any case, I am no good. I am a marked man."

He told briefly his adventure on the train and mentioned the fact that the pseudo-drunk was staying at the St. Gellert, on the same floor. Then he remembered the notes. He produced the second which the Turkish Bath attendant had slipped into his hand. Paddy read it carefully.

"What does it say?" Stephen asked.

"I can't make much out of it," the newspaperman confessed. "Perhaps it means more to you. It says: 'I think he is either Italian or German. Come at five a.m. to my room

and talk it over. Bring gun, lost mine. K.' Not very clear, is it? "

"No-o," answered Barrett thoughtfully. "Not very. But one thing is pretty certain. In all probability this was written by my lovable friend who shammed intoxication. I saw him losing his gun. In fact, I kicked it out of his hand. And he is meeting his friends at five a.m. That should be interesting. . . ."

"I thought you were washing your hands of the whole business," smiled Paddy.

"Oh, I am!" Stephen assured him. "But I have an inherent objection to gentlemen who first want to borrow a comb and then hold me up with a gun. I must make the closer acquaintance of Mr. K., whatever his real name."

"Listen, Stephen," the Irishman said, suddenly serious. "The gentleman whom I saw this morning fixed up a meeting for us to-night—with another gentleman, even higher up. The latter is going to take an awful lot of trouble just to meet you—so you can see that the matter is desperately important. The Gestapo and the OVRA watch him like hawks and he takes considerable risks to talk to you. You must come—after all, a day or two cannot make any difference. Perhaps you can wire London . . . though I'd prefer you to wait until to-morrow morning. Meet me outside the back entrance of the hotel at one-thirty. Do it for your old pal's sake, if for no other reason."

Barrett shrugged.

"All right, Paddy. But you're going to take the blame if we get into hot water with London. And now I think I'd better retire and do a little fast thinking."

For more than an hour the large closed car had been travelling through the night. The blinds were drawn, and Paddy seemed to have lost his usual verbosity. Barrett had been somewhat startled to find Furka at the wheel when he had joined the Irishman outside the hotel. He had taken every precaution to shake off any possible "shadows", and as far as he could make out no one had followed him.

The long drive made Stephen sleepy. For most of the time

they seemed to be climbing, and he guessed that they were heading for the heart of the mountains which rose so close to the centre of Buda, the hilly half of the Hungarian capital. They were quite respectable hills—some of them almost two thousand feet—and thickly wooded.

At last the car stopped. Paddy sat bolt upright and touched Stephen's arm. "Don't talk until we are inside," he whispered. "You never know who's hanging around."

The door on Barrett's side was opened, framing Furka's massive figure. He looked even more enormous in his tall fur cap and thick coat.

The moonlight was uncertain, wavering. A low, squat building loomed in the background, the dark ribbon of a narrow path led towards it. It was bitterly cold, and Stephen glanced up for a moment at the sky, studded with icy, indifferent stars.

When they reached the house he saw that it was a mountain lodge built in the style of Swiss chalets. They entered a small, square hall where a big grandfather clock proclaimed that it was twenty to three. Then a door opened and a young man with a brown face, blue eyes and a haggard look came forward to greet them.

"You are a little early," he said in faultless English. "He isn't here yet."

He led them into a long, spacious room, heated by an open fireplace in which two huge logs were glowing. Stephen stamped his feet and peeled off his clothes. Paddy performed the introductions:

"Count Martin Kalnoki . . . Mr. Stephen Barrett, alias Señor Almyda. . . ."

Stephen looked at the young man. The nephew and adopted son of Count Stephen Kalnoki, one of the Guardians of the Crown who had died the night before . . . murdered, if Paddy was to be believed. He saw the tension and unhappiness in the pleasant, clear-cut features, the light blue eyes. Well, he was sorry for the youngster . . . probably a pampered Magyar aristocrat in whose life the grimness of sudden death and dark intrigue had intruded for the first time . . . but it was not his job to bring to book murderers of Hungarian

landowners, even if they were Guardians of the Holy Crown of St. Stephen. . . . Still, he looked like a woodsman and one skilled in many sports. His movements were supple, his body well balanced, and he wore the old Harris tweed suit as if he were an English country squire.

"I am glad you came, Mr. Barrett," the young man said. "We all are expecting so much from you. . . . We . . ."

He broke off suddenly, as if he had said too much, and offered his two guests a glass of *barack*, the famous apricot brandy of Kecskemét. Stephen tossed off the pale liquid, and the fiery glow which spread in its wake seemed to warm and reassure him. Granted that all this was strange and mysterious—he had not lost so much time and could return to Zagreb with the first morning train.

At the same moment there was the sound of a car drawing up outside. Count Martin turned to them:

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind waiting for a minute in the other room," he said. "He may want to talk to me first . . . if you'll excuse me . . ."

Curiouser and curiouser, thought Stephen while he followed Paddy into the neighbouring, smaller room, furnished with Hungarian peasant tables and chairs. Paddy put his finger to his lips to signal silence, and Stephen threw himself on a sofa bright with embroidered tulips and roses in gay colours.

They waited for about five minutes, then the door opened and Count Martin beckoned to them.

The lights had been turned down and only a small lamp burned, so that most of the room was in shadow. So was the face of the man who sat behind the desk but rose at their entrance. His English was clipped, free of any foreign accent, the dry, precise voice of a man used to public speaking and lecturing in several languages.

"Mr. Flaherty? . . . Mr. Barrett? . . . Thank you for coming. I am sorry I had to put you to the inconvenience of a long night drive, but you will realize that I had to meet you under such circumstances unless the whole purpose of our meeting was to be jeopardized."

Barrett studied his features—the deeply lined face, the straight, thin nose, the small grey moustache and the sharp

eyes behind the shell-rimmed spectacles. A weary but wise face: the face of an intellectual who has been forced to become a man of action and who disliked this necessity. The body which belonged to this face was thin but not emaciated, wiry and not frail. Barrett knew the man who faced him across the desk; but he was not sure whether he was expected to betray his knowledge. However, Paddy's first words ended his uncertainty.

"We were glad to come, Your Excellency, and realized that secrecy was essential to this meeting."

The man with the tired face laughed. But there was no gaiety in his laughter.

"Essential? I can assure you, gentlemen, if certain people were to discover the fact and purpose of our gathering, it would lead to my speedy death. And it would have very unpleasant consequences for yourselves. I would not have risked this meeting if I had not been assured that Mr. Flaherty and his friends are to be trusted. As for Count Kalnoki . . . he is here because the matter I wish to discuss is very near and dear to him, and he has every right to take part in our deliberations."

There was a little pause, and Barrett felt the tension in the room, almost tangible; a tension which seemed to grow every second.

"Mr. Barrett," said the man behind the desk, "I understand that you have considerable experience in investigating political and diplomatic problems—especially if these have certain criminal implications."

Phew, what a mouthful you said, Your Excellency, thought Stephen somewhat disrespectfully. It was certainly the fanciest description of espionage or secret service work he had ever heard. But he only nodded.

"A friend of mine asked Mr. Flaherty on my behalf to send for you," the other man continued. "I want to find out whether you are willing to undertake a certain investigation. I may as well tell you that it involves a burglary, several murders and a suicide. It also involves the future of Hungary and possibly South-Eastern Europe."

Barrett stared at him, his brain working overtime. He tried

to piece together the disjointed information Paddy had given him, the knowledge he had of the political situation in Hungary and Yugoslavia, the three obituary notices in the *Pester Lloyd*, the fact that young Count Martin was present . . . but it seemed a hopeless muddle and he gave it up.

But evidently this man with the clipped, precise voice was expecting an answer. If only Paddy had not gone his own foolishly impetuous Irish way! How could he reply to such a request when . . .

"Surely, Your Excellency," Stephen said suavely, "your country has a highly qualified and well-organized police to deal with such problems. In the present political circumstances a foreign subject would be hardly qualified to . . ."

"The present political circumstances make it impossible for me to employ our own police to any effect," the statesman interrupted him. "Naturally I would not have asked you to come here if I could . . . fully rely upon them. . . ."

It was a confession which sounded strange on the lips of a politician who was at the helm of his country. The muscle which twitched on the left half of His Excellency's face showed that it was hellishly hard for him to make this admission. But Barrett was still puzzled and a bit tired of this diplomatic verbiage.

"You mean you don't trust them to find the criminals, Your Excellency?" he asked bluntly.

"I mean that I don't trust them to hold the criminals once they find them," came the equally blunt answer.

There was a little silence. Then Barrett spoke again:

"Perhaps you would tell me a little more, before I . . ."

"I am afraid that I need your undertaking first to work for us before I can give you full details," the other man said.

This won't do, Barrett told himself. I am certainly not going to walk blindfolded into a thicket of trouble just because Paddy went haywire. On the other hand . . . and he remembered the short talk he had with the Serbian customs official on the frontier. If it were really serious . . .

"Even a mere outline would be helpful," he pointed out.

The man behind the desk sighed. His face seemed to be even wearier, the lines deeper on his sunken cheeks.

"I am taking quite unwarranted risks," he said. "But perhaps it is just as well. If you know everything—or at least as much as I do—you may make up your mind quickly."

He leant back in his armchair, his face beyond the circle of light.

"The day before yesterday," he began, "an attempt was made on the life of Baron Budai, one of the Guardians of the Crown. This was foiled by two unknown and mysterious men who shot the would-be assailants, killing one and wounding the other. The assassins were dressed in the uniform of the Budapest police, but they were not policemen. One of them escaped, but we identified the other who was left dead in the street. He was a Gestapo agent named Hofbauer."

Barrett began to sit up and take notice. This was certainly astonishing news—especially from the lips of a man whose country was a signatory to the Tripartite Pact. Of course, he knew of the deep-rooted hate for everything German which the average Hungarian felt . . . yet in two wars they had marched with Germany and only a few weeks ago His Excellency had spoken in Parliament in highly complimentary terms about the Fuehrer.

But he did not like to interrupt and the other man went on:

"The two men who had stopped the Gestapo agents from murdering Baron Budai got away. I have no proof, yet every reason to suspect that they belong to an underground organization calling itself the Ragged Guard. If you want any information about this secret society, I will put it at your disposal—it may suffice to say now that the Hungarian Government disapproves gravely of its activities and has done nothing to encourage it. Misguided patriots might be the mildest characterization applied to them; some of their methods resemble gangsterism. I won't have anything to do with them. . . . I won't . . . I won't . . ."

His voice rose almost hysterically and he pounded the table. Yet all the time he was looking not at Barrett or Paddy but at the young Count, who stood close to the window with a set, pale face. There was a little pause and His Excellency regained his self-control with a visible effort.

"We could not do anything in the matter," he continued

in a low voice. "There was no doubt about the intentions of the two pseudo-policemen. We buried the dead man without any public enquiry. The following night—last night—the Holy Crown of Hungary was stolen from its strongly guarded steel chamber and two murders were committed. Baron Budai and his colleague, Count Kalnoki, were killed at the same time. Colonel Marjai, commanding officer of the Crown Guard, committed suicide."

"You speak of the Guardians of the Crown and the Crown Guard," interrupted Stephen. "What is the difference between the two?"

"The Guardians of the Crown are office-holders under the Hungarian Constitution. We have a list which contains the names of the Guardians back to the early seventeenth century. There are always two of them, one a Protestant, the other a Roman Catholic—they are charged, under the constitution, to supervise the Crown Guard, to act at important State functions and at every occasion which involves the crown. They are elected by parliament from a list of candidates put forward by the King—or in the present circumstances by the Regent. The Crown Guard is a special company of the Hungarian Army which is entrusted with the physical protection of the crown. It is a body of picked men, N.C.O.s and officers. It is considered to be the highest honour for any Hungarian soldier to be drafted into this company. . . . I may add that during the robbery at the Royal Castle a corporal of the Crown Guard, an N.C.O. of twelve years' service who has refused promotion in order to be able to stay in the Crown Guard company, was also killed. . . ."

Stephen Barrett knew that it was rude to interrupt an important statesman. But his quick brain was jumping ahead, playing leap-frog with facts and ideas.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency," he said, "but I always understood that the Holy Crown of St. Stephen was guarded day and night so strongly and strictly that it would be impossible for any common burglar, be he possessed of the highest skill, to get at it. I cannot understand . . ."

"These were no common burglars," said the man with the tired face. "They had replicas of the keys with which to

open the steel chamber. There are only three pairs of keys to that door: one for each of the Guardians of the Crown and the third in my possession. All three pairs have been found intact, nor did anyone have access to them. Someone must have made a wax impression of the keyholes. The burglars were dressed in uniforms of the Crown Guard and gave the correct password and countersigns. They must have had a locksmith of extraordinary talent at their disposal to have skeleton keys made. I am sorry to say that the suicide of Colonel Marjai left little doubt: it was he who helped to make the burglary possible. The two men passed through the outside guards, shot the corporal, threw a bomb filled with a strong anæsthetic gas into the guard-room, opened the strong-room doors and cut open the iron chest holding the crown. Then they got away through a side-door of the palace. . . . The outside alarm of the guard-room had been turned off—presumably by the Colonel—and the alarm apparatus of the strong-room was cut by the burglars. . . .”

He saw that Barrett was frowning. He nodded.

“I see that you are puzzled how I know all this if, as I said, our police have proved very unhelpful. I will tell you. I received a detailed report on the matter from the anonymous leaders of the Ragged Guard. *They* found out what my own police president was unable to tell me—that Colonel Marjai had been gambling and losing heavily . . . that he had been bought or blackmailed by the Gestapo to help in this incredible burglary. . . .”

His voice trailed away. Then he took up again the story with a bitter laugh:

“The police were not very helpful. And so twelve hours ago I took them off the case.”

“But surely,” said Barrett, determined to get to the bottom of this fantastic tale, “a crown is not like a ring or a pearl necklace! The thieves—whoever they were—would be unable to smuggle it out of the country, and if they succeeded, they could not sell it. What was the value of the crown?”

“The value?” repeated the man behind the desk. “I don’t know. A few hundred pounds, perhaps. Or a few thousand. It doesn’t matter. I doubt if these thieves ever

intended to offer it for sale. . . ."

"Well, but in that case why . . ."

The man with the serious, weary face leaned forward. His eyes were enormous behind his glasses; a fire seemed to have been kindled in them and the reflection of leaping flames danced in his pupils.

"Mr. Barrett," he said, "I don't think you have studied our history and our constitution. But, you see, the Holy Crown of St. Stephen is something more than a mere symbol or a piece of ancient jewellery. If the Crown of the King of England were stolen from the Tower, Britain and the Empire would carry on without even the slightest tremor. It is different with us. Over nine hundred years ago the first King of Hungary had been crowned with this crown. For nine centuries all kings had worn it—for if they were not crowned with it they were not the lawful rulers of our country. The Holy Crown is both the embodiment of Hungarian unity and an important, essential part of our constitution. All Magyars, even the humblest and poorest, are 'members of the Holy Crown'. I heard of a clever young man who went abroad and had visiting-cards printed which said: '*membrum Sacrae Coronae*'. People thought that he was a member of some important order. It was an amusing piece of bluff—but it was fundamentally true. Every Magyar owes allegiance to the man crowned with this crown—though the coronation must be performed on Hungarian soil, by the Archbishop or Primate of Hungary and with a definite ceremonial—and every Magyar can refuse obedience to a king or prince on whose head the holy jewel had not been placed. . . ."

"Yes . . . but Hungary is not a kingdom. Admiral Horthy . . ."

" . . . is governing in place of the lawful king whom the Hungarian Parliament is entitled to elect when circumstances permit it. King Charles IV of Austria-Hungary has abdicated. The right to elect a king reverted to the nation. But we are still a kingdom . . . and we insist on choosing our own king when the time comes. . . ."

"I see," said Stephen slowly, though there was still a good deal he could not see. "You are fairly sure then, Your Excel-

lency, that Colonel Marjai was responsible for the theft of the crown or rather that he had made it possible and then committed suicide. The corporal of the Crown Guard was, I take it, shot because he resisted or wanted to give the alarm. But what about the . . . the Guardians of the Crown? "

His Excellency turned towards the young Count who was still standing silently near the window.

"I think," he said, a little hesitantly, "Count Martin Kalnoki can tell you the facts better than I. He . . . he was present in the Budai palace last night. . . ."

The young man stirred. His face was almost twisted in pain and anger. He spoke in short, jerky sentences:

"Last night . . . Baron Budai gave a party for his daughter's twenty-first birthday. My . . . my uncle and I came up for it from Kalnokhaza, our country estate. Large party, big crowd. Shortly after midnight a messenger arrived. Brought a letter from His Excellency," and he bowed towards the man behind the desk. "Letter—a clever forgery—said that he wanted to discuss urgent matter with my uncle and Baron Budai in half an hour . . . in Budai's study. My uncle and the Baron went there—alone. When they had been away for an hour, I became uneasy . . . don't know why . . . perhaps because of the attempt on Baron Budai's life the afternoon before. . . . I enquired whether His Excellency had arrived and discovered that no one knew about him. We . . . we broke down the door of the study, which was locked on the inside, and found my uncle and Baron Budai both dead, shot at close range. . . ."

His fresh young voice faltered.

"They . . . there had been a clumsy attempt to make it look as if Baron Budai had shot my uncle and then committed suicide. . . . The murderer had escaped through the window."

"How did you know that . . . the attempt had been made to incriminate Baron Budai?" asked Barrett.

The young man smiled wearily.

"The assassin had made one mistake . . . a small slip, perhaps unconscious. We found the gun in Baron Budai's lap. But the safety catch was *on*. No one could commit a murder, shoot himself, and then replace the safety catch of a pistol.

Also, the gun was without a number and had never belonged to Baron Budai or my uncle. . . .”

“Was anything taken from the room? Any valuables . . . papers?” enquired Barrett.

“No, nothing. Of course I immediately notified the police and His Excellency. But the murderer got away. . . .”

Count Martin stepped back into the shadow. Barrett, still puzzled, turned to the man behind the desk.

“I must confess, Your Excellency, that I am still in the dark. You said, if I remember, that the thieves who used Colonel Marjai to gain entrance to the strong-room of the crown had no access to the keys . . . that both yours and the pairs in the possession of Baron Budai and Count Kalnoki were found intact, absolutely safe. . . . What motive could there be for the murder of the two Guardians if not to gain the keys?”

The tired man with the spectacles glanced up sharply.

“You seem to have a very keen mind, Mr. Barrett,” he complimented the Englishman. “Naturally this point occurred to us—but we, being Hungarians, could answer it easily. They *had* to kill my two unfortunate friends in order to make their plot complete. For after all we might have been able to keep the disappearance of the crown a secret—if not indefinitely, at least for a long period. The Guardians of the Crown are seldom elected at the same time. Usually one of them holds his office for a longer set of years than the other. If only one of them is elected in the solemn and complex way I told you, the other *guarantees the presence of the crown in its strong-room and there is no need to open the iron chest and convince both Guardians that the crown is actually there*. If, however, both Guardians take office at the same time, our laws prescribe a definite ceremony during which the strong-room must be entered and the crown taken from its coverings. . . .”

“You mean . . .” began Stephen, but the other man cut into his question.

“Exactly. I mean that when the two new Guardians take office in about a month’s time, the secret cannot be kept any longer. Especially as one of the new Guardians will be, in all probability, Count F., a well-known supporter of the Nazis

. . . prepared to go much farther in co-operation than I or my Government was ever willing to go. . . ."

"But surely the two soldiers who were in the guard-room . . ." began Stephen once more.

"They have been removed," the man with the tired face anticipated his question, "before they recovered consciousness. They are under close supervision in . . . one of our mental homes. We have given them every comfort, but they have no ways of communicating with anybody. Similar arrangements have been made with all the other outside guards. This is far too important, Mr. Barrett, to take any chances—and what little we could do, we did quickly and, I hope, efficiently. . . ."

There was another little pause, and Stephen felt that the tension in this quiet room was growing steadily. He decided to risk another query:

"You have given me a great deal of information, Your Excellency," he began. "But you haven't provided a motive for all this. Why should the Gestapo go to all this trouble, take all these risks . . ."

Before the man behind the desk could answer, there was a knock at the door and a man in a chauffeur's uniform entered. He saluted and handed a large envelope with a red seal to His Excellency.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, and rose.

When he had left the room, Barrett looked at Paddy, but the journalist was staring moodily at the bearskin rug in the middle of the floor; nor did Count Martin move from his place at the window. Five minutes passed in silence, then the statesman with the deep lines on his face returned. He seemed to be even wearier; his shoulders sagged, and it was with a visible effort that he sat down behind the desk and faced his visitors again.

"I am afraid," he said, "that we must cut this discussion short. I have some news . . . extremely serious news. It will furnish the answer to your question, Mr. Barrett. . . ."

He tapped a thick pile of cables which he had apparently extracted from the large, sealed envelope.

"These have come from our Belgrade Legation," he said.

"An hour or so ago the Yugoslav Army, by a *coup d'état*,

deposed Prince Paul and all the members of the Government. King Peter has assumed power. The new Government has been formed by General Dusan Simovitch, Chief of the Air Force. Dr. Matchek is Vice-Premier—the members of his Cabinet are all anti-German. Picked Air Force troops have occupied the police station and other important Government offices in the centre of Belgrade. Messrs. Tsvetkovitch and Cincar-Markovitch are under arrest. . . .”

He recited the momentous news in a quiet, monotonous tone, but his excitement was evident.

“I have told you everything I could, Mr. Barrett,” he turned to Stephen. “I must have your answer now—for every minute counts. Are you willing to take up the case on our behalf? ”

Stephen took a deep breath. He felt a strange guilt, yet he could not do otherwise. It was all Paddy’s fault. And now with trouble in Jugoslavia he must be back at his post at the earliest possible moment.

“I . . . I am sorry, Your Excellency,” he said. “I cannot give you a satisfactory reply. First of all, Mr. . . . Mr. Flaherty summoned me to Budapest without making the proper arrangements with my superiors. I could consult them . . . but I still do not know enough to justify a request for permission to take up the matter. Then again, I don’t see how I could succeed, alone or with very little support, if I had to deal not only with the Gestapo but with your own police of . . . of doubtful loyalty. I feel that I must return to Zagreb at the earliest possibility. Instructions may await me there. . . . I may be already missed. . . . I . . . I am sorry. . . .”

He fell silent, feeling that he had not expressed himself too clearly . . . but what else could he say? The man with the tired, lined face lifted his shoulders in a tiny shrug.

“I am also sorry, Mr. Barrett. I take it that I can trust your absolute discretion. But if . . . if you should by any chance change your mind, Flaherty knows how to reach Count Kalnoki or myself. Good night, gentlemen.”

He rose and walked quickly from the room. The young Count looked at Stephen with a terrible, pleading urgency in

his eyes, but he got no response. He followed the statesman. A few moments later an engine started outside and there was the sound of a car grinding its way up the steep incline. A few minutes and even its noise was lost in the distance.

"You are a silly ass, Stephen."

The gaiety and banter had vanished from the Irishman's voice. It was sharp with annoyance. He was sulking in one corner of the car in which they were being driven back to Budapest. Barrett glanced at his watch. Half-past three. They had spent only an hour in the mountain lodge. He would still have time to prepare for the visit to the room of the mysterious K. whom he identified in his mind with the pseudo-drunk on the train. Or should he leave him alone and return to Zagreb with the early morning train? Time to decide that when they reached the St. Gellert. . . .

"I thought you had more brains, Paddy," he answered patiently. "This Yugoslav business may prove very awkward. I am sure that the old man is already burning up the wires between Zagreb and London. . . ."

"But don't you see that this is more important than any twopenny-ha'penny job they might give you?"

"Why?"

"Oh, there are dozens of reasons."

"I wish you could give me a single good one," sighed Barrett. "You must agree that you haven't been very helpful. You pitchforked me into this interview with His Nibs, who was very nice and trustful but rather confused. You wouldn't tell me anything this afternoon. I certainly hadn't sufficient information to decide whether the whole business about the crown and its Guardians was so desperate or significant for our own show. Young Count Martin is a nice fellow—but I am not investigating chance murders just because . . ."

The Irishman in his exasperation was jumping up and down on the soft leather cushions.

"But man alive, I couldn't tell you anything. Most of the things you heard to-night were just as new to me as to you . . . though I suspected some of them. And now they fall into pattern."

"Well, I wish you would tell me what this was all about."

"Look, Adonis, it's not so complicated. This country is surrounded, hedged in by Germany, Italy and Russia or their vassals. It has to play ball with them—*up to a certain point*. The Magyars must give the Nazis their grain and cattle, permit them to use their capital as a centre for espionage . . . they even were forced to make friendly overtures to the Russians though they are not fond of Communism. But there is a certain point at which the Hungarians—at least His Excellency, a right-wing politician, an anti-Semite, perhaps even a reactionary, but undoubtedly an honest patriot—would refuse to co-operate. They would rather see their country occupied like Denmark than do the dirty work for Hitler & Co. You know that they have got back almost all the territory they really wanted to regain. The rest would only mean headaches. They have old scores to settle with the Czechs, Rumanians, Slovaks—but they don't want to settle them through the Nazis. They have refused up to now to introduce the Nuremberg Laws. They have put their own would-be quisling, that Armenian Szalasi, into prison. So they have at least not completely gone Nazi. And they have signed a pact of eternal friendship with the Jugoslavs."

"Yes, yes, I know all that. But what has that got to do with stealing the crown and killing these aristocrats? You don't mean to tell me that Schicklgruber wishes to crown himself Adolf the First of Hungary?"

"No, I don't think that even he would be so daft," growled Paddy. "But I think that if the disappearance of the crown became known, the present Government would fall. So, to put it very simply for half-wits like you . . . if the Nazis want Hungary to do something the present Magyar Government would baulk at . . . out comes the threat of spilling the beans about the crown and Fido has to come to master's heel."

"All right, I begin to see light. But why do you think that the Gestapo is mixed up in all this? Others might have committed the murders and the burglary. Just because His 'Nibs seemed to have thought so . . ."

The Irishman leaned closer to his companion and said, in a stage whisper:

"Schwarzwolf is in town. So is your charming friend Lepke. And His Excellency, Baron Borries von Lieven, is staying at the German Legation—someone told me, *en route* for Turkey. . . ."

"Good God, Paddy! Why didn't you tell me before?"

Stephen Barrett had met Schwarzwolf, the man with the queer, hissing voice, before. Only a few months ago they had a sharp tussle in Portugal in which the Gestapo agent had come out the loser. Before that they had crossed swords in Germany, Holland and—during three hectic months—in New York. If Schwarzwolf was in Budapest, something pretty serious was brewing. And then . . . he would like to have another go at the German, to put him out of business for good. Lepke was a minor figure, though capable of extreme nastiness. As for Bórries von Lieven . . . he belonged to the Papen clique, and Stephen could not quite place him in such strange company. But the Junkers had made their pact with the Nazi Devil and had realized that any attempt to rebel against Hitler would lead to their own destruction. It was a great temptation . . . to know that Schwarzwolf was on the war-path and that he might queer his pitch. But no . . .

Paddy was spluttering.

"Did I have the opportunity to get anything into your thick Cornish head? I thought you were the seventh son of a seventh son, and therefore blessed with second sight. But in any case, now you know. Are you going to tackle it?"

Stephen Barrett hesitated a moment.

"No," he said firmly, "it's not my pigeon at all. I have no official authority and I don't want to get into trouble with London. You go ahead on your own—you can manage it alone. After all, I am a marked man myself—they seem to have spotted me right on the frontier. I'm going back to Zagreb. . . ."

"But, Stephen . . ." Paddy started, and then stopped. A look at the set, determined face of his companion convinced him that nothing *he* could say would change Stephen Barrett's mind.

It was a quarter to five when they reached the silent street

on the mountainside, a few hundred yards above the big black mass of the St. Gellert.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come along?" asked Paddy when they got out of the car and stood for a moment in the dark, desolate street, lined with neat front gardens and attractive villas.

"No, thanks, Paddy. But ring me about six o'clock in my room. If I am not back, you can come to the rescue. But I expect I'll be safe enough. Our friend has lost his gun, if you remember."

Stephen had not forgotten the two mysterious notes or given up his intention to pay a visit to the gentleman who signed himself "K." Even if he had refused to have anything to do with the problems of His Excellency, here was a personal score to settle—for he still resented the attack on the train. Paddy shook his head, but offered no more advice. They parted in front of the back entrance of the hotel and Stephen slipped inside. He had stayed at the St. Gellert before and could have drawn a plan of its floors from memory. He walked up the service staircase, which was only dimly illuminated by small lamps at each landing. He had figured out that "K.'s" room was next to one with a balcony. If he could get on that balcony . . .

He made his way to the fifth floor, where the distribution and plan of the rooms was identical with that of the floor below. He waited for a few minutes, flattened against the wall of the landing, but nothing moved. Then he stole along the corridor to the last door on the left. It was, as he expected, a floor-waiter's pantry, with shelves and a small table. He tested the latter; it seemed sturdy enough to bear his weight. He opened the window just above it, stepped on the table and gradually worked the upper half of his body through the opening. There was a fairly broad ledge below him, and four feet or so to the right, a balcony. Before he tested the ledge with one foot he glanced down. It was still dark, for dawn came late on this wintry March day. Five stories below him the big square in front of the hotel was all but deserted except for a couple of taxis and a lonely policeman on point duty just on the ramp of the Francis Joseph bridge. Even if the square

had been full of people, there was little chance that they would have seen him against the dark stones of the hotel. He had merely tested the steadiness of his head. Climbing the Cumberland fells, mountaineering in Switzerland and the Rockies had cured him of any fear of heights. He wished he had a rope or something—but he trusted his own body and mind.

Luckily, the ledge was sheltered by an overhanging section of the roof and so it was not slippery. He stretched himself flat on it and inched himself along until he could reach the railing on the balcony with his hands. There was a split second when he seemed to be flying through space and then, with a small thud, he had landed exactly where he wanted.

The rest was easier. By calculating the distance to a nicety, he gained the balcony just below the first one, on the fourth floor. And here luck favoured him again: apparently Mr. "K." had a double room, and there was no need for him to make his way to the ledge of the next window. The curtains were not drawn and he had a good view of the man he planned to visit. As far as he could judge from the back view, Mr. "K." was the pseudo-drunk of the train. At the moment he was certainly not drunk. He was sitting in a chair facing the door, though drawn a little to the side—and Stephen could see a very business-like gun in his lap.

"Evidently expecting a visitor," muttered Barrett to himself. "Expecting *me*! What the . . ."

So it had not been a mistake, a silly blunder—those two notes slipped into his hand . . . they were designed for a deliberate trap. He was supposed to have been informed "by error" that Mr. "K." was alone and unarmed at a specified time and place. It would have been quite natural for him to have walked into the room through the door, planning to dispose of "K." without any difficulty as the latter had no gun. If it had not been for his inborn caution, he would certainly have tried the easier way. As it was . . .

He decided to try a bold and straightforward stratagem. He took his cigarette-case from his pocket and knocked sharply on the window. The man in the armchair turned round at once. It *was* the drunk from the train who had asked for a

comb. He rose, walked to the window and looked out. Stephen drew back against the wall so that he was invisible. The man inside the room shrugged and returned to his armchair. Barrett waited two or three minutes and then rapped again on the window. This time everything went "according to plan". Mr. "K." stumped angrily to the window and flung it open. Then something hit him on the head and he fell with a dull crash on the carpet.

"Well, well, Mr. K. seems to have passed out again," murmured Stephen, looking down at him. "I wish I knew what to do with him. . . ."

If he had planned to stay in Budapest he might be taking drastic action; but thus it would suit him if Mr. "K." would stay *hors de combat* for a few hours. He took his gun, trussed him up with a rope he found in the cupboard—probably intended for *him*—placed his victim in the armchair and slipped into the corridor.

It was only a few yards to the door of his own suite. He took his key from his pocket—he had not left it at the porter's desk—and turned the knob. In the moment when the door closed behind him, a sharp, strong beam of light blinded his eye and a woman's voice said:

"Put up your hands! "

Stephen obeyed without hesitation. A woman whose voice was so young and unsteady might possess a finger far too quick on the trigger. The voice said now, a little more self-assured:

"Take a step to the left. There's a chair. Sit down. Don't try to move from the chair. I've got you covered."

"Thank you," Stephen said, very politely. "I hope I haven't startled you," he added. "This is room 445, isn't it? "

There was no answer, only the rustle of silk—and then the lights went up. Stephen swung round and saw a young, tall girl in a black dress, unrelieved by any colour or jewellery. Her gentian-blue eyes were enormous, her face pale. Her loveliness almost took away his breath. Her bluish-black hair, her slim body and finely drawn lips would have sent a Hollywood producer into raptures. But she seemed to be

desperately worried; she walked slowly, as if carrying some invisible weight. There was an old-fashioned Mauser in her hand which she held none too steadily.

"My name is Eve Budai," she said in a low voice. "You must forgive me for . . . breaking into your room . . . but I can assure you that I am not your enemy."

Stephen glanced significantly at the gun.

"Mr. . . . Mr. Barrett," hesitated the girl, noticing the direction of his glance, "would you promise me that you listen to me patiently if . . . if I put away this gun?"

"Of course I promise," Barrett said quickly. He wanted to add some facile compliment that he would listen to such a beautiful lady without being forced to at the point of a gun—but he saw that she was worried and in pain, and kept silent.

The girl slipped the gun with evident relief into a black evening-bag. She smoothed her full skirts. There was a tremulous smile on her red lips when she began:

"Half an hour ago Count Martin Kalnoki telephoned me. He told me that you refused to help us in investigating the murder of my father and his uncle. I came here to ask you to change your mind."

There was no artifice in her voice or words; she stated her point simply, directly, and waited for his reply.

"But, Baroness," protested Stephen, feeling an irrational anger that he should be put into such a false position, "I explained to His Excellency and Count Martin . . ."

"I know," she nodded. "But . . . you must understand what is at stake. For me . . . for Martin . . . for Hungary—but also for you. They killed my father because he was against them . . . against their foul system, their murders and rapes . . . they killed Count Kalnoki because he stood for Catholic aristocracy and Magyar independence. But they did worse than kill them. If the theft of the crown becomes known . . . if this terrible scandal is revealed, the honour of my name . . . and Martin's name . . . is lost for ever. The Budais and Kalnokis will be known in Hungarian history as traitors . . . who have been responsible for the loss of our holiest relic . . . whose negligence or treachery has delivered

the country, bound hand and foot, to the Nazis. . . ."

She stopped, short of breath, with pleading eyes.

"Baroness," said Stephen, deeply embarrassed, "I can understand how you feel. But look upon me as a soldier. I cannot leave my post—and though I was lured away, I must return to it. . . ."

She clasped her hands and bent forward, her supple body a tense bow in her deep earnestness.

"But don't you understand?" she cried. "You heard the news of the Yugoslav *coup d'état*. That means that Hitler is going to attack the Serbs . . . and force the Hungarians to attack them. If His Excellency refuses, they can ruin him through the scandal of the crown . . . and there are plenty of others in Hungary who are willing to be quislings, to serve as Germany's jackals. . . ."

All that she said made good sense—her words were so much clearer than the diplomatic explanations of the statesman with the weary face, Paddy's theories or his own guesses. And yet . . . But for the first time since he had discovered that Paddy had called him to Budapest without sufficient authority, Stephen began to wonder whether he should not stay, after all. He hastened to tell himself that it was not because Baroness Eve was so lovely or so convincing. . . .

He tried one last argument.

"Suppose that all you say is true. Suppose that it is in the interest of . . . of my country to foil these plans. What could I do alone? I would have to fight not only the Gestapo—and the man who is in charge here is as vicious as he is capable—but also the Hungarian police. You, Baroness, with Count Martin, my friend Flaherty and myself would be hardly sufficient . . . and His Excellency gave me to understand that he could offer very little help himself."

Her face brightened; she was sharp enough to feel his weakening. Also, apparently here was an argument she could answer easily.

"Oh, but there is the Ragged Guard!" she said. "Haven't you heard of them?"

"Yes, I have," Stephen confessed. "His Excellency spoke of them . . . though not in very complimentary terms. But

if they . . . whoever they are . . . would be willing to help me, why can't they do the job themselves? "

The girl clapped her hands in sharp annoyance.

" Oh, Mr. Barrett," she cried, " you seem to be trying to wriggle out of this whole thing, and if I hadn't heard that . . . "

" . . . that I have some experience of danger, you would think I am a coward," Stephen finished her sentence calmly. " Maybe I am. But *what* is this Ragged Guard? "

Before she could answer, the door opened and two men rushed in. Count Martin was first, his pleasant young face flushed. Paddy was close on his heels. They stopped at the sight of the young girl who rose with perfect composure. Then Count Kalnoki blurted out his news:

" Bőrries von Lieven is leaving this afternoon for Bucharest. We have good reason to believe that the crown is in his luggage."

In Belgrade young King Peter drove through the streets and was enthusiastically acclaimed by many thousands of his loyal people. The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church addressed a cheering, happy crowd outside his palace and said: " At this decisive moment, when the history, honour and glory of the Serbian people are in peril, there has appeared a bright star of the Karageorge dynasty, the young King Peter II, to safeguard, with his people, their history, their honour and their glory." Prince Paul was on his way to Athens. Rome Radio muttered darkly that Britain " does not intend to diminish her activities. She reacts with violence against realities and the situation which has developed." Germany was less diplomatic. The Berlin wireless warned the Serbs that the German Army was ready to intervene if the activities of " malcontent " elements in Yugoslavia should give rise to disorders. Mr. Churchill jubilantly declared that the Yugoslav nation " had found its soul ". In East Africa the British battered their way into the mountain stronghold of Keren. And in Budapest Stephen Barrett snatched a hasty breakfast before he settled down to compose a cable which would explain why he wasn't in Zagreb where he should have been, and why he was in

Hungary where he should have had no business at all.

He asked for an immediate reply, and in an hour a telegram arrived informing Señor Almyda that the two Corot pictures were for sale, and that the Christie auction would not take place until the middle of April. Which, after due decoding, meant: "*You can stay, but God have mercy upon your soul if you get into hot water.*" This none too gracious permission at least put him right with London and relieved Paddy's anxiety, who realized, at last, that he had acted rather rashly.

Even before breakfast Stephen had paid a visit to Mr. "K.'s" room—but he found him gone. There was no trace of the rope with which he had trussed him up. Well, the fat was in the fire now, and if his opponents knew who he was and why he was in Budapest, he could not help it.

Or couldn't he? Señor Almyda was a very pleasant fellow, a comfortable *alias*—yet Stephen decided to kill him without hesitation. He paid his bill, packed his bags and said good-bye to the St. Gellert. His taxi was followed by a police car, but his driver was a bearded giant who resembled Furka amazingly—or not so amazingly, for he was Furka's brother—and a little manœuvring shook off the pursuers. Both Count Martin and Eve had offered him hospitality, but Stephen naturally refused. "If I am going to be of any use to you," he said, "there must be not the slightest surface connection between us. It would be suicide to stay with either of you or Paddy. No, if I am given someone who can keep in touch with you, we'd better separate for the time being."

And so Señor Almyda died and Herr Steiger, a Swiss manufacturer, arrived in the Hôtel Dunapalota. Herr Steiger was a few years older than Señor Almyda, and no one would have recognized Stephen Barrett in him. Not that Stephen believed in any elaborate disguise, the fairy-tale world of false beards and wigs—but he had learned the art of moving, breathing, talking, walking in accordance with any new character he assumed. No one would have given a second glance to the sedate, unassuming Herr Steiger—at least no one who was not trained in the art of observation and detection. Stephen knew that Schwarzwolf was staying at the Hôtel Dunapalota-Ritz. The German agent loved luxury and comfort; and as he had

little reason to disguise his whereabouts and plans in Hungary, he boldly selected the foremost hotel. Yet Barrett risked meeting his old opponent face to face—because, being close to him, he could keep an eye on his comings and goings.

Börries von Lieven, according to the information of the Ragged Guard, was leaving at half-past six for Turkey. His sleeping-berth had been reserved as far as Bucharest, where he was to stay for some days before going on to Sophia and thence flying to Istanbul. Barrett did not question this information, but decided that before he followed the suave diplomat he would first try to pay a visit to Schwarzwolf and also meet the leaders of the Ragged Guard. If he was to co-operate with this organization, he must learn their aims and strength, their passwords and customs. Eve had no time to give him any information, for after Paddy and Count Martin had burst into the room Stephen was far too busy.

He was given a pleasant room in the Hôtel Dunapalota, with a view of the Danube and the Royal Palace. Its impressive grey façade did not betray the dark secret, death and daring burglary, which only a few nights ago had taken place behind it. Herr Steiger unpacked his few belongings and then descended to the ground floor. Stephen always believed in bold and simple methods, so he marched up to the information desk and asked whether Herr Schwarzwolf was in. He had made sure first that no one else was at the desk—he did not want his query to be overheard.

The porter glanced at the row of pigeon-holes.

"I am afraid Herr Schwarzwolf is out," he said. "He left his key. Could I give him any message?"

"No, thank you," said Barrett without a moment's hesitation. "I'd like to surprise him—I am an old friend of his. I'll try to find him again later in the day."

The porter nodded and turned away to answer a lady who was enquiring for the best route to the St. Margaret Island. Stephen had watched him closely and seen his hand hover for a moment over the pigeon-hole numbered 52A. The room-numbers on his floor ran from 12 to 35—Schwarzwolf's room must be on the floor above. He took the lift once more to the first floor and then walked up the stairs to the next one.

Fifty-two A was on the right side of the corridor. He walked up to the door and knocked. There was no answer. He saw a waiter passing in the distance but with his back to him. Stephen produced a small, compact instrument which was a strange thing for a Swiss chocolate-manufacturer to carry about, slipped it into the keyhole, and after adjusting it by a fraction of an inch he turned it in the lock.

He found himself in a tiny hall with a couple of coats hanging on a hat-stand and three pairs of shoes placed just inside the door. The door opposite was padded. He swung it open with the tip of his shoe. The room was in darkness, the curtains drawn, and there was a stale, heavy smell. Probably the maids had not yet been up here—perhaps Schwarzwolf had gone out late in the morning. He stretched his hand towards the switch which the opening of the door had revealed . . . but he never touched it.

Someone was moving about in the small hall. Stephen slipped to the wall and felt his way along it until his fingers touched some heavy fabric. The curtains. He found the opening and disappeared behind them just as the door began to open. It opened cautiously, slowly, inch by inch; and Stephen wondered. This did not seem like Schwarzwolf returning home to his own room—unless, of course, his own presence had been suspected and the Gestapo man was trying to surprise him. It certainly could not have been one of the hotel servants. . . . He waited, tensed for a sudden pounce. There was a click and a broad streak of light flooded the carpet. He moved the curtain a little and peeped out.

The man he saw was a total stranger to him: a broad-shouldered, thick-set man in a black suit, a white collar and a black tie. For all his sturdiness he moved about lightly, noiselessly. His face a reddish brown, wind-bitten, the face of a man who spent most of his life in the open air and who had the deft sureness of a hunter. Stephen watched him going about the room, obviously searching for something. At last he found it. For a moment this object was covered from Barrett's view; then the man turned to catch the light better, and he saw that he held in his hand a travelling clock in a leather case. Calmly, as if he were no intruder, he sat down and proceeded

to open the back of the clock. He worked swiftly but without hurry. Then he took a small, pencil-like object from his pocket and slipped it in the back of the clock. He bent a short, thin piece of wire and connected the "pencil" with the mechanism. Then he wound the clock carefully, and Stephen was close enough to see that he set the alarm for nine o'clock—about ten hours forward.

Having done all this, the unconventional visitor replaced the clock in the white pigskin suitcase with the swastika markings in black leather, glanced around to see whether he had left any trace of his visit, and then left the room just as silently and cautiously as he had entered. He put out the light before he went and Stephen remained in the darkness.

He waited a minute or two to make sure that the stranger had left before he emerged from his hiding-place—only to scuttle back again to it when he heard steps once more. But these were not careful or stealthy—the man who entered had a right to be in this room. Or rather, there were two men. The light flared up again and Stephen saw, only a yard or two away, Schwarzwolf and Lepke, in coat and hat, apparently having come in straight from the street.

"Phew, what stale air!" Schwarzwolf was saying. "These pigs of Magyars don't even know when to clean a room . . . and this the first hotel in the country!"

"Didn't you tell them not to do it while you were out?" enquired Lepke.

"What if I did?" The Gestapo agent was apparently in a bad temper. "I told them to go over it while I was in—and then they said that it was too early!"

He peeled off his coat and hat and threw them over the pigskin suitcase. Then he sank moodily into a brocade-covered armchair.

"Have you any news about Freytag?" he asked.

"No. We traced him as far as that infernal restaurant—but after that the earth seems to have swallowed him."

"Are you sure he went in there?"

"Yes. Balcke, the owner of the Twelve Apostles, is a member of the Arrow Cross. He is a good German. He even changed his name—it was Magyarized to Balkai—back to

Balcke by deed-poll. But Balcke says it was a very busy day yesterday and Freytag might have gone out again . . . he didn't notice. . . ."

"Check up on Balcke . . . and the Twelve Apostles. This cannot go on! The sixth man we lose in three days! Well . . ." Schwarzwolf sighed with satisfaction, "thank God it won't last long. . . . Once we put on the screws with the Crown, they'll dance to our tune. . . . His Excellency, the Professor and all the rest of them."

He lay back with closed eyes, his thin face pale, the scar twitching a little on his temple. Lepke was respectfully silent. Suddenly, without opening his eyes, Schwarzwolf said:

"You know, I don't trust our friend an inch. . . ."

"You mean, the Freiherr. . . ."

"Ja, Freiherr Bories von Lieven, von und zu Drachenfels, Lord of the Imperial Bedchamber and holder of the Ritterkreuz," Schwarzwolf said with a bitter sneer. "I wish I had taken charge of the crown. As long as it is inside the country, it is not quite safe. Especially with the infernal Ragged Guard still at large."

"But after all, we were told that the Freiherr was to decide how and when . . ."

"We were told, we were told!" mocked Schwarzwolf.

"But if anything goes wrong who'll get the blame? I. And you, too, my friend." He opened his eyes and stared at Lepke. "You know very well that Himmler and Heydrich take results as natural, but never forgive a mistake. And I can't take any risks. . . ."

He sighed. Then he sniffed.

"Open those curtains, Heinrich . . . it's stifling here. Wait . . . 'phone down first that they should send up a chambermaid . . . and reserve a table downstairs in the bigger dining-room, close to the windows which open on the corso. . . . I want . . ."

But Stephen was waiting for no more. In a minute or so he would be exposed—helpless. He fumbled behind his back and found the catch of the french windows. Schwarzwolf and Lepke would probably notice if he left the window open . . . but he had to get away. He swung the tall panes outward

and turned at the same moment. There was a ledge just below him, about two feet wide, and half a dozen yards away a balcony. He smiled wryly when he remembered last night's mountaineering on the fifth floor. This was only the second—but it was broad daylight and he had farther to go. Yet he did not hesitate. He heard the muffled voice of Lepke telephoning to the desk and then he was crawling along the ledge. He passed three windows and looked into empty rooms. Then he measured the distance and, swinging out, caught the balustrade of the balcony. His luck held—he pulled himself up just in time. This side of the hotel looked upon a side-street which at the moment happened to be empty. He was glancing through the windows just opposite the balcony when Schwarzwolf's head was thrust through the open window half a dozen yards back, and his voice growled: "What the hell . . . I thought these windows were closed. . . ." The German's head swung round to the left—a split second too late. Stephen was already within the room. A fat gentleman in his underclothes was bending down in front of a dressing-table, apparently in search of an elusive stud. Stephen measured the distance from window to door, covered it in one flying leap, said politely in German: "Pardon the intrusion!" and was in the corridor before the fat gentleman had finished straightening himself.

Behind him he heard a commotion, but the door of Schwarzwolf's room had not yet opened when he reached the service staircase. He almost ran into a pretty chambermaid who stared after him open-mouthed; but his luck held again. She made no attempt to follow him, and he gained the sanctuary of his room without any hindrance.

He had scarcely closed the door behind him and stood against it, panting, when the telephone on the little table began to ring.

He lifted the receiver slowly. It was Paddy's voice.

"Half-past twelve . . . the Twelve Apostles. . . . Sit near St. John."

"What the . . . Hallo! Hallo! "

But he shouted in vain. The line had gone dead.

A long, dark, narrow passage led from the street into the

Twelve Apostles; a warm, ripe smell of food—rich, good food—and beer filled it. There were long glass shelves on both sides lighted with neon-tubes and laden with bottles of wine, Hungarian pottery and dolls. Stephen, walking towards the noise, smoke and warmth, realized that he was very hungry. He hoped that whatever important business Paddy had to transact in this place, it would give him time to make a good meal.

Paddy had given him no instructions how to get to the Twelve Apostles, but from the conversation between Schwarzwolf and Lepke Barrett had gathered that it must be a restaurant, and he found its address in the telephone book, though in Hungarian it was called "*Apostolok*". He made sure that he was not followed—but who would be interested in Herr Steiger whose mission in life was to sweeten the existence of others by slabs of *Milchsokolade*?

Just inside the entrance an obsequious head-waiter greeted him and tried to steer him to the left where a largish room, equipped with booths, was filled with eating and chattering people. But Stephen had already discovered why the place was called the Twelve Apostles. On the right there was a narrower room with six booths or alcoves on each side. These were divided by tall oaken partitions, and each separate alcove was decorated by the mosaic head of an apostle, the appropriate names also being worked into the pattern: Peter, Mark, Luke, Matthew, James . . . John. . . . And the booth over which the head of St. John presided on the wall was empty. Stephen set out for it without hesitation. The head-waiter tried to stop him, but he paid no attention to his entreaties, and the man shrugged, giving it up as a bad job.

Stephen sat down and looked around. The place was full of people, noise, the rich smell of food and beer. He saw a tall man with waxed moustaches pass along the tables, greeting the guests, supervising the service. . . . Apparently Herr Balcke who had changed back his name to German from its Magyarized version because he loved the Fuehrer above all. He looked like a smooth and shrewd fellow; a man who knew his mind.

Barrett found a waiter standing at his elbow; he ordered some Debrecen sausages whose excellence he remembered from his last visit to Hungary and a *stein* of dark lager. He had to

wait for his order, but nothing happened, and he began to think that he had come on a fool's errand. Then the steaming, spiced sausages arrived and he cut off a generous piece. He was just lifting the *stem* of velvety dark, foamless beer when a voice said just above him:

"Guzzler!"

His head swung round but he saw no one. He peered around the partition, but one of the neighbouring booths was empty, while in the other two swarthy gentlemen were talking animatedly, lost in an argument.

He shrugged his shoulders and stabbed another slice of sausage with his fork. It was half-way to his lips when the voice spoke again:

"Disgusting!"

This time his glance flew up to the mosaic on the wall. St. John smiled serenely. There was something disquieting in his smile. Almost a sneer—ill-fitting the gentle Evangelist.

Stephen decided to solve the mystery. He fixed his eye on St. John and asked in a strong whisper:

"Were you talking to me?"

"'Course I was. Gobble up your food and then go to the cloakroom. Ask the attendant for a rag to clean your shoes. He'll do the rest."

The face was St. John's—stiff and gilded in its Byzantine pomp—but the voice was Patrick Flaherty's. At least there was a suspicion of the Irish brogue in it, and Stephen's keen ear caught it, however incongruous on the lips of a mosaic saint.

He finished his food without hurry, drank his beer and paid his bill. The cloakroom was just at the end of the room with the alcoves; he sauntered there and passed through the door unobserved.

A smiling, brown-skinned attendant—probably a gipsy—was scrubbing one of the basins.

"Could I have a rag to clean my shoes?" asked Stephen in German, following his instructions. "They are rather muddy, I'm afraid."

The man stared at him for a moment, then he turned and beckoned to Barrett, who followed him. In the background of

the cloakroom there was a mirror. The attendant touched one of its screws whereupon it slid away, disclosing an iron door. They stepped through it and came to a winding iron staircase. The attendant drew back and pointed downwards. Stephen nodded and began to descend the stairs. They were narrow and damp—they seemed to go very deep into the ground. Then he reached the last turn and found himself in a large cellar, well lit with carbide lamps. Five people were sitting around a wooden table. They looked up when he emerged from the shadows, and Stephen stopped, conflicting emotions struggling in his mind. The five people who faced him were Count Martin, Eve Budai, Paddy Flaherty and . . . but this was a strange nightmare, disquieting and unnatural like seeing wolves and lambs side by side, peacefully . . .

The fourth person was the drunk from the train whom he had last seen trussed up in the chair at the St. Gellert. And the fifth was the tall fellow with the waxed moustaches whom he had watched moving about among the guests of the Twelve Apostles, at least three stories above his head.

"I am really sorry, Mr. Barrett," the mysterious Mr. "K." whose full name was Katona, told Stephen. "It was a mistake which might happen to anyone. We—the Ragged Guard—thought that you were an agent of the Gestapo or the OVRA. That's the reason why we attacked you on the train. I am glad you foiled us—for I am afraid we wouldn't have waited for any explanations. We are hunters who are hunted ourselves—and we can't pause for any reason. . . . I am sorry. . . ."

He spoke English with a broad mid-Western accent, and later Paddy told Stephen that Mr. Katona had farmed some fat acres in Minnesota and had returned to Hungary just before the Second World War. Now, well combed and brushed, he did not make such a sorry figure as he had on the train. On the contrary, he looked pleasant and intelligent.

"But . . . what about the notes?" asked Stephen, still at sea.

"The same thing happened. We were expecting a Gestapo man to stay at the St. Gellert. We set the trap—and you walked into it. Or rather, you didn't," Mr. Katona added ruefully, rubbing his wrists and neck. "You took me by sur-

prise . . . and I wasn't very bright, I grant you. Then I met Count Martin, and when I described you, he explained everything. Please accept my apologies! "

Stephen murmured that there was nothing to apologize for—but he was still a little puzzled. And, mixed with this sense of confusion, there was also a sense of urgency in him—as if he had something immensely important to do, at once, without the slightest delay. But first he had to get all this clear.

"You sent for me," he turned to Paddy. "Why? "

The Irishman smiled.

"Did you enjoy the sausages and beer? "

"Paddy, stop fooling. What is this place? "

It was the tall man with the waxed moustache who replied:

"The Budapest headquarters of the Ragged Guard. Mr. Katona and myself are responsible for the organization in the capital. . . ."

"But you . . ."

Mine host of the Twelve Apostles nodded. There was a merry twinkle in his brown eyes.

"I am a member of the Arrow Cross Party—which, as you know, is the Hungarian equivalent of the Nazis in Germany or the Quisling Party in Norway. Very useful thing, too. A pity that I had to change my good Hungarian name back to the German which my ancestors wore four hundred years ago when they came to this country from Württemberg . . . not from Prussia, Mr. Barrett."

Barrett remembered at last one thing which he had to do in a hurry. In a few words he sketched the conversation between Schwarzwolf and Lepke he had overheard behind the curtain in the Dunapalota.

Balcke-Balkai smiled.

"Well, it was bound to happen. You see . . . quite a number of Gestapo agents had met with . . . an unfortunate accident in our cloakroom. Though God knows, our plumbing is modern enough. I thought that sooner or later Herr Schwarzwolf would become suspicious. We were preparing to move our headquarters to a more secluded spot in the Buda mountains . . . and then Herr Schwarzwolf has very little time left to interfere with us. . . ."

The last remark somehow did not register in Stephen's mind. He went on with his questions:

"And Baroness Budai . . . Count Martin . . ."

"Both Baron Budai and the late Count Kalnoki were strong sympathizers though not members of the Ragged Guard," Katona said. "You will understand that their heirs have every reason to be with us. . . ."

Stephen did not feel it necessary to ask by what right Paddy was present—after all, he had mentioned the Ragged Guard in his cable to Zagreb, and his connection with them must be long-standing. But he wanted to know what this mysterious organization was whose members looked like prosperous farmers, who killed and committed burglaries without the slightest compunction, whose headquarters were three floors below a restaurant with mosaic figures which had peep-holes for eyes and lips. . . .

Yet before he formulated his question, something flashed into his mind. A sentence which the man with the waxed moustaches had spoken. ". . . and then, Herr Schwarzwolf has very little time left to interfere with us. . . ." And he saw a sturdy, muscular figure moving in a dimly lit room, working unhurriedly, deftly, to detach the back of an alarm-clock, putting a pencil-like object into it, connecting the pencil with the works . . . and then placing the clock in a white pigskin suitcase with black swastika markings. . . . How strange and characteristic the insolence of the Gestapo agent to travel about with a piece of luggage which blazed forth brazenly his allegiance. Stephen wondered idly whether Schwarzwolf was using the suitcase with the swastika markings in countries not yet belonging to the "happy new order". . . .

He sat up, startled by his own train of thinking.

"Did . . . did you make some arrangements for the disposal of Schwarzwolf?"

Katona looked at him without a trace of embarrassment.

"We placed a small, concentrated charge of explosive in his luggage," he said quietly. "It is timed to explode at nine o'clock to-night. Herr Schwarzwolf is going to be blown sky-high."

"But . . . but . . ." spluttered Stephen who, in his varied

career as a secret agent, had seldom met such quiet determination and callousness, "what about the . . . the hotel? Other people are staying there and . . ."

Katona smiled.

"Herr Schwarzwolf has settled his bill this morning. He is moving to the German Legation."

It was twenty-eight minutes past six when Stephen Barrett—still as the meek and pedestrian Swiss chocolate-manufacturer—boarded the train at the Eastern Station. He selected a seat in the last carriage, next to the luggage-van which, according to the Continental custom, was the last among the coaches. He was as late as he possibly could be because he thought that he had a better chance to slip on the train unobserved. He had been told that the Ragged Guard had one man on the train who might get in touch with him. He had been given the small pin which was their secret emblem: a tiny, ragged shirt worked in gold. Count Martin explained to him that only a few of the leaders had this golden pin—and then Eve Budai asked for his handkerchief and calmly proceeded to cut off its edges in a ragged line. It was a nice piece of silk, matching perfectly his shirt and tie, but he did not protest.

"Keep the pin well hidden," Katona said to him. "But you can use the handkerchief unobtrusively—after all, it might have got torn at any time and by any accident. This is our counter-signal."

He had listened to their matter-of-fact and yet excited talk with the feeling of unreality. There was something Ruritarian about all this—a cloak-and-dagger tone and setting. Yet all over Europe, all over the world stranger things were happening than Anthony Hope, Phillips Oppenheim or Edgar Wallace ever conceived. They were happening with increasing frequency so that thriller writers groaned when they read their morning newspapers: nothing they could devise at eight-and-sixpence could beat the stories which their readers could acquire in daily doses at a penny or three-ha'pence. And yet there was something fundamentally sane and workaday about the Ragged Guard; something solid and stable in a world where all values had tumbled and man became a bewildered animal, a

prey of force and chance.

All through their talk the red thread of urgency ran. Apparently His Excellency had not exaggerated when he spoke of the approaching danger for Hungary, of the forces which were pushing her into the vortex of war. The pro-Nazi aristocrats, members of the Senate of the Hungarian Parliament, insisted that the election of the new Guardians of the Crown should take place at the earliest possible moment, and under their pressure the Regent was forced to fix the joint session of the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament for the second of April. That meant that by the fourth the elected Guardians would be ready to take their solemn oath . . . and before they could do that they had to inspect the crown and its treasure chamber. The fourth of April . . . or perhaps even the third . . . that meant that there were six or seven days left in which to recover the crown and remove any trace of its violation. A short time indeed if Baron Bőrries von Lieven could succeed in getting it out of the country. . . . That was the cause of the tension among the members of the Ragged Guard . . . the cause of His Excellency's pleading . . . the reason of Schwarzwolf's bland and insolent move to the German Legation. The Gestapo man knew that he would be master of Hungary's fate, the power behind the scenes, as soon as the crown was safely outside the borders and he held the biggest bargaining stake a man was ever able to use against a whole nation. . . .

They were too afraid of a single mistake, the smallest slip which would ruin the chances of recovering the crown—that was the motive behind the Ragged Guard's insistence on Stephen's help. They could not know which of their leaders or members was on the Gestapo's black list; Count Martin and Baroness Eve were suspect because they belonged to the families of the murdered Crown Guardians; Paddy, of course, had been for a long time a thorn in Himmler's or Herr Bohle's side, whichever of the two gangsters was responsible for the "pacification of Hungary", for bringing her safely and completely into the Nazi fold.

Stephen found the ticket-collector of the Budapest-Bucharest express just as amenable to a little "palm-grease" as his colleague on the Kelebia-Budapest run, and secured the first-

class compartment to himself. He had little luggage, but Paddy had provided him with a very businesslike automatic and Mr. Balcke-Balkai added a thin-bladed, small dagger which Stephen strapped to his left forearm.

The train was gathering speed and clattering over points before reaching the main line for Arad. Stephen decided to reconnoitre. He stepped into the corridor and glanced towards the end of the carriage. A man was sitting there on the small, collapsible seat of the ticket-collector—a man in an ill-fitting suit whose whole bearing betrayed the soldier or the professional thug. The set of his shoulders, his close-cropped, almost albino moustache, his deep-set eyes and brutal mouth were all in keeping with the character of strong-arm man and watchdog of any Hollywood gangster film. Only instead of a bowler hat he wore a travelling cap of semi-military cut and he was not smoking or chewing a big cigar.

Behind him the connecting door of the luggage-van was lit by a solitary bulb. Its narrow window was barred. It would not be easy to get in there—yet he must examine the big trunk which Baron Bőrries was reported to have sent down under strong guard to the railway station. Of course, there was always a chance that the crown—not a very bulky object—would be in his personal luggage which he might keep in his own compartment. Barrett decided to leave the husky guard and the luggage-van alone for the time being and investigate von Lieven's whereabouts.

He made his way along the swaying corridors, peeping through doors and windows. None of them were curtained; it was too early for sleep, and in most compartments people were talking, eating or reading. The third class was very crowded with peasants and workmen; the Hungarian lower classes had the strange habit of using long-distance trains for short trips whenever they could, as the slow trains took such a long time. There were two first-class carriages just before and after the diner—and in one of them Barrett came upon the solitary figure of Freiherr von Lieven, smoking a cigarette in a long holder and engrossed in some sort of official publication. His compartment was at the end of the coach, and thus Barrett could watch him comfortably and unobserved.

Apart from an attaché-case, lying half open on the seat, there was not a single piece of luggage in the compartment.

When Stephen returned to his own seat, the sinister guard at the entrance of the luggage-van was still at his post. They had passed through the suburbs of the capital and the train was now running on a steep embankment flanked by open fields. Barrett had once more scrutinized his fellow-travellers. One or two were sitting with their backs to the doors, some might have been in the lavatories—but he was fairly sure that von Lieven had no companions. Only one coat and hat were in the rack above his head—so perhaps with the exception of the "gorilla" sitting only a few feet from his, Stephen's, compartment, the enemy seemed to be absent. Barrett realized that this did not mean the total and certain absence of danger—for, after all, any innocent disguise might cover a Gestapo agent—but perhaps von Lieven preferred to travel alone, with a solitary gunman at a discreet distance. . . .

The problem was how to get into the luggage-van. This again could be "subdivided" into two tasks: to get rid of the unpleasant-looking guard and to outwit the railway-man who was certain to be on duty in the van.

Stephen decided to tackle his not too easy problems one by one. It would be to his advantage to recover the crown as near Budapest as it was possible—for the Ragged Guard's leaders had told him that their network was concentrated at the moment in and around the capital.

He sauntered into the corridor and reached for his cigarette-case. Then, a cigarette in his hand, he approached the man who was sitting in an attitude which suggested a parody of Rodin's Thinker and asked him for a match.

The fellow looked up with a surly glance, then reached into his pocket for a box of wax matches. The space was narrow and the train gathering speed—it seemed almost natural that Barrett should jog the man's elbow and make him drop the matches. They both bent down for them at the same time—and when they straightened, Barrett's fist swung out. There was no place for the man to fall—his head struck the wall of the corridor and then he slumped forward.

It had been a mad risk to take—but time was pressing and he was alone. The ticket-collector had passed shortly after they had left the station, and Stephen knew that their first stop was half an hour away. Unless some unlucky chance foiled him, he had no need to fear any interference. He hoisted the unconscious man on his shoulder and lifted him to his feet. Then, putting his left arm around his own neck, he staggered with his load—and the victim of his ruse was heavy enough—to his compartment which, luckily, was barely a few yards away. He dumped him on the opposite seat and then produced adhesive tape and some stout rope—both supplied by Paddy—from his pocket. When he had finished gagging and trussing up the inert figure, he wound a scarf round his face and covered him up with a coat. Except from the immediate vicinity he looked like a man who had a bad toothache and also felt very cold. There was no way of locking the compartment door from the outside, but Stephen drew the curtains and trusted his lucky stars. Dusk was rapidly falling, and he placed the light-switch half-way down so that when the lighting would be put on by the ticket-collector's master switch only the little blue bulb—a sort of night-light—would be burning.

He left the still unconscious figure, not without misgivings, and made his way to the door of the luggage-van. He peered through the thick glass framed by stout iron bars. He tried the door—it was locked. Beyond it the van was divided into two parts—the one nearer to him was full of piled-up suitcases and trunks, while in the background a man was standing in front of a table, sorting mail which he flicked with a practised turn of his wrist into the pigeon-holes just above him.

Stephen knocked. There was no answer. He rattled the door. Nothing happened. Finally he began to kick it. That fetched the man in the background; his face was angry, crowned by straw-coloured hair.

Before he could speak, Barrett addressed him in German:

"I am sorry to trouble you . . . I just discovered that I left my passport in my big trunk. I simply must have it . . . if you wouldn't mind. . . ."

The railway clerk had opened the door only a crack. Suspi-

cion and official dignity mingled on his face.

"Where's your ticket?" he asked.

Stephen insinuated a foot into the crack.

"I've got it in my coat . . . and I left it in my compartment," he said. "But I've got the keys . . ."

He produced a small bunch of keys which, to his best knowledge, would not open a single suitcase or trunk in the luggage-van. But they seemed to have a certain reassuring effect on the man. He opened the door another two inches.

"Well . . . it's against the regulations. But I suppose . . ."

He never finished the sentence. "Barrett's Flying Tackle" used to be a sort of legend at the rather exclusive public school which Stephen had attended (and never talked about). The railway clerk went down with wildly flaying arms and legs—but mutely, for Stephen's left hand was firmly pressed on his mouth. He was a small but wiry fellow, and Stephen did not want to hurt him seriously. It took about two minutes before his opponent relaxed and lay motionless. Stephen glanced around. His first thought was a suitable hiding-place for the second "body" at his hands. Just opposite the sorting-table with its pigeon-holes was a broad bench. He dragged the unconscious man underneath it and covered him up with two blankets he found. He was certain to be "out" for half an hour—and he had no more time left in any case to search the noble Freiherr's baggage.

A search of five minutes revealed von Lieven's luggage: a big trunk and three small suitcases, all with clearly marked labels. "DIPLOMATISCHES GEPÄCK! NICHT ÖFFNEN!" Of course, diplomatic baggage was not to be opened on the frontiers. . . . All four were locked, but the locks were not of any special intricacy and Stephen's small chamois-leather bag of tools proved adequate for the task. He opened all four of them first and then began his search. The first revealed the fact that His Excellency had a nice taste in silk pyjamas, shirts and underpants. The second was very heavy and filled with bottles—bottles of Tokay, *barack*, plum-brandy and walnut-brandy with half a dozen bottles of champagne added for a good measure. He was just tackling the third when a slight noise made him swing round suddenly.

A tall, thin figure stood in the doorway with a gun in his hand. His face was twisted in a grimace of fury.

Stephen rose and faced him calmly. It was very unfortunate that of all men his old foe Schwarzwolf should have come upon him at this moment, but he always took setbacks philosophically. His nimble brain was working overtime to devise some dodge or escape. A pity he had no time to go through all the Lieven luggage . . . but there would be, there *must* be another chance. After all, he was not quite alone . . . somewhere around him, near him, were the extremely capable members of the Ragged Guard. . . . All this flashed through his mind while the other man stood motionlessly, his eyes fixed on Stephen's face. And the grimace of fury slowly yielded to an expression of puzzlement, ending in a frank, malicious, delighted grin.

"Herr Barrett! What a surprise. I had no hope of seeing you again this side of hell! If I only had known . . ."

It had been inevitable, thought Stephen dully. His disguise—and there wasn't much of it—could not stand up to the experienced, searching glance of such an old hand at the game. But when he dropped his eyes, he suddenly forgot about Schwarzwolf and the gun. He was staring at a suitcase which he had uncovered during his search for the baggage of Bórries von Lieven . . . a suitcase which he knew only too well . . . pigskin with a pattern of black leather . . . a swastika. He even remembered that darkish stain near the top left edge . . . a suitcase he had seen last in Schwarzwolf's room at the Hôtel Dunapalota . . . the very same into which a member of the Ragged Guard had placed a carefully devised time-bomb or infernal machine. It was set to go off at nine o'clock . . . in about two hours' time. And when it went off it would wreck not only the train but all hopes of recovering the Holy Crown of Hungary. For instead of moving to the German Legation in Budapest, for some unknown reason Schwarzwolf had elected to board the same train as His Excellency, Hitler's Minister Plenipotentiary. . . .

Barrett hesitated. Should he tell? Schwarzwolf would not believe him. There was only one course open . . . and he lunged forward. . . .

He felt that the firing of the gun created an enormous noise in the enclosed space, but it was probably smothered to a considerable extent by the rattle of the train. He sensed that he was hit—but perhaps it would have needed more than a bullet to stop him. Schwarzwolf saw him coming before he could fire again, and tried to dodge. They went down in a heap among the scattered pieces of luggage. Somewhere a dog began to yap furiously. The German was strong and resourceful in spite of his thin frame, and Barrett knew that the bullet must have hit him in the left arm, which began to go dead. He noticed now that the door set in the middle of the carriage was a sliding one. While he was warding off Schwarzwolf's vicious blows—the Gestapo agent had dropped his gun under Barrett's first rush—he manoeuvred him towards this door and pushed it open with one foot. The German noticed his intention and did everything to roll him back into the middle of the luggage-van. For a little time Stephen acted as if he had been overcome and Schwarzwolf snorted triumphantly. But in their swaying, rolling fight they had now come close again to the white pigskin suitcase with the black swastika. It was not a very large or heavy piece of luggage, and Barrett succeeded in pushing it towards himself with his left foot. Then with a sudden revival of strength he butted Schwarzwolf in the stomach. The German fell back groaning. Stephen used this momentary respite to get hold of the suitcase and send it hurling through the open door.

He was just hesitating whether to follow it or not when something hit him from behind and he fell. Before he lost consciousness, the puzzled question swept through his brain why he had risked so much to save the life of a man whom he would have been happy to see eaten by cannibals or boiled in oil. . . . But he never had time to answer his own query; before oblivion came he had already sunk into a world of fiery stars and velvety darkness. . . .

In Moscow and Leningrad the papers gave much prominence to the Yugoslav news. President Roosevelt's intervention settled the strike of the Bethlehem Steel Works. In Tokio pious hope was expressed that Mr. Matsuoka "would exchange views

unreservedly on the question of the success or failure of a German invasion of England, which was the main question in the European war", and on Japanese-German policy towards Russia. In Britain the sad total of air-raid victims was announced—the dead and wounded totalled almost seventy thousand, while the number of soldiers killed was only one-fiftieth of that number. The current joke was about the private knitting socks for his poor mother in London who was in the front line. The German News Agency was busy spreading reports about Germans being assaulted in the streets of Yugoslav towns, exhibits being smashed in the German travel bureau and the offices of the German-Slovene cultural organization being ransacked. With a pitiful spurt of decency Vichy refused to deliver 5,000 tons of petrol and other oil stocks in Tunisia and Morocco to the Axis. The Chinese captured Kaoan. Sofia was excited by the reports of German troops moving towards the Yugoslav frontier. In Belgrade the new Cabinet took the oath and assembled with King Peter for a Mass of thanksgiving, attended by the Diplomatic Corps . . . including the German Minister. The editor of pro-German *Vreme* was arrested and the paper suspended. After the Mass the German Minister presented a Note demanding a written answer as to the new Government's attitude towards the signature of the Axis Pact, maintaining that the signature was binding. The new Foreign Minister, M. Ninchitch, was reported to have given an evasive reply. . . . Hungary was watching events "with considerable anxiety".

And somewhere in Hungary Stephen Barrett sat up in pitch darkness to massage his aching head and feel the bandage on his left arm. He winced at his own touch. He felt his pockets: they were empty. His captors—and he had a shrewd guess as to who they were—had removed all his belongings, including his gun and stiletto. He had no idea of the time, but he rose with some difficulty and made the circuit of his prison. It was a small room with smooth, concrete walls, a table, a chair and the cot on which he had been lying. A metal door was set flush with the wall opposite the cot. As far as he could make out there were no windows or openings in the walls, yet the air was fresh enough, so there must be some

hidden aperture—perhaps higher up where he could not see it.

After this cursory inspection he returned to the cot and stretched himself on it. Whatever new dangers the future might bring, he needed his strength. His wound might not be serious, but it was painful—yet he was able to forget it by a strong concentration of his will. In a few minutes he was fast asleep.

The opening of the door woke him—he had no idea how long he had slept. Two men came into the room, but he could not make out their faces until one of them had placed a carbide lamp on the table and lit it. Then he saw—though he only gave them a stealthy glance—that it was Schwarzwolf and . . . the “thug” whom he had tricked on the train and left, bound and gagged, in his own compartment. The latter’s stolid face wore an expression of intense disgust and boredom. Schwarzwolf was dressed in an S.S. uniform, and for a moment the panicky thought flitted through Stephen’s mind that he was in Germany. But it seemed hardly likely that Schwarzwolf would leave Hungary at this critical stage of his underground planning.

The Gestapo man came over to the cot and shook him, none too gently. Barrett gave a very creditable imitation of a man just awakened from his sleep.

“Oh, still the nightmare!” he said, forcing a grin on his stiff lips and staring up in Schwarzwolf’s face.

The German’s narrow face was inexpressive. He turned to his companion:

“You can go now, Franz. I’ll call you when I’ve finished.”

He waited until the door had closed behind the surly guard and then said, abruptly:

“Barrett . . . where’s the crown?”

Stephen thought that his ears had played him a trick, but Schwarzwolf repeated:

“I cannot waste time . . . where’s the crown?”

Barrett realized that his best line would be the truth.

“I thought you had it,” he murmured.

Schwarzwolf bent over him.

"I wish you'd realize that your time's up," he said in a persuasive, almost friendly voice. "You had a long run, Barrett—but it's all over now. This time you've been too foolhardy . . . you've lost. Szeged may be a Hungarian town, but the German Army has practically taken it over and this house belongs to the German consul, where even the Hungarian police wouldn't dare to interfere. I hate to drag in the time-honoured argument: but even if you are prepared to die—and you must die, naturally—you may prefer to quit this world without any messy unpleasantness."

"Schwarzwolf, I blush for you," Stephen laughed. "Death or worse-than-death? It has gone out of fashion with Queen Victoria."

The Gestapo man moved the carbide lamp so that its strong, crude flame threw its light straight into Stephen's face.

"There's something I can't understand," he said thoughtfully. "You threw out that suitcase when you could have jumped out first yourself. Why did you do it? Why did you save my life?"

"I did nothing of the sort . . . I hope," replied the Englishman.

"Barrett, I told you that time is getting short. There was enough dynamite in that suitcase to blow up the Hôtel Duna-palota. It blew up Lepke and the other man whom I sent to pick it up. And Lepke was a man I was rather sorry to lose. But why didn't you jump from the train yourself . . . and where is the crown?"

"You are very tiresome, Schwarzwolf," answered Stephen. "Do you expect me to produce a nice series of falsehoods just to escape your thumbscrews and Iron Virgins? You ought to know me better. I didn't throw out that suitcase. It rolled out. And I didn't jump because someone bashed me over the head."

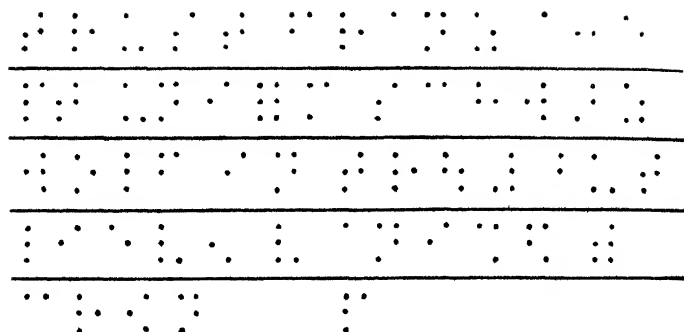
Schwarzwolf stared at him for a long time, but Stephen did not weaken under this disconcerting scrutiny. In the end the Gestapo man rose.

"All right, Barrett," he said. "To tell the truth, I prefer

it this way. It will give me considerable pleasure to see you squirm."

Stephen did not reply; Schwarzwolf went to the door and called out for Franz. The big, lumbering man came in to fetch the carbide lamp while Schwarzwolf was already on his way out. When the huge bodyguard passed Stephen's coat he dropped something. His eyes flickered for a second, then the impassive mask was pulled down again. But he walked slowly, and in the disappearing light of the lamp Stephen could see what the object he had dropped was. A handkerchief. His hand flew to his own breast-pocket. Yes, it was there—they had not thought it worth removing—the silk handkerchief which Baroness Eve had mutilated so cruelly. He stretched out his hand and lifted the other handkerchief. It was of coarse linen . . . exactly as ragged as his. By this time his prison was quite dark again; there was the dismaying sound of a key being turned twice in the lock. Yet Stephen's spirits began to revive. Was it possible? That typically German-looking gangster type with his bullet head and Epsteinesque face . . . could he belong to the Ragged Guard? He had given him clearly the sign of recognition . . . the ragged handkerchief. Even if it was a trap, he could not be any worse off than he was at the moment. He had put up a brave front, but he knew that his position was hopeless unless . . . unless his friends had traced him and were preparing his rescue. There was something funny in the idea that he had robbed himself of protection on the train by putting the very man "to sleep" who was there to help him. . . . His fingers were smoothing out the handkerchief and suddenly stopped. Pinned to the inside was a piece of cardboard. He slid his finger-tips over it and felt tiny irregular mounds or points in relief on it. Perhaps quite unreasonably, he was filled with exultation. He had suddenly guessed what these irregular signs were—and he knew that Paddy must be near. For of all the people in the kingless Kingdom of Hungary only Paddy knew that he could read Braille.

He brushed his finger-tips against the rough cloth of his coat to make them more sensitive. Then he began to read:



Friend Paddy had apparently done this job in a hurry and used some unorthodox abbreviations, but after one or two attempts Stephen had the message clear. And it was a strange enough message:

“ TRUST FRANZ ACCE
PT UNIFORM SCHWARZ
WOLF IN TROUBLE BUT
LIEVEN VANISHED WITH
CROWN P ”

Apparently the unprepossessing giant was to be trusted. But what uniform was he to accept? And what was Schwarzwolf's trouble? Probably the disappearance of Lieven . . . with the crown. But Lieven was to go on to Bucharest . . . he could not have vanished. . . . Stephen wished that Paddy had been less concise. But he could not do anything about it. Nor was he apparently expected to give any reply. Well, he could do nothing except—trust Franz and wait. He hoped that whatever uniform he was to accept was a becoming one.

It was. The trappings of a *Generaloberst* of the German Army are impressive even in war-time. Stephen Barrett, smooth-shaven, his arm in a sling which his cloak hid most effectively, walked in Olympian silence through the gates of the German Consulate in Szeged which was—most significantly—guarded by two Hungarian gendarmes and two privates of the *Reichswehr*. Apparently Hitler had turned the second

largest city of Hungary into a German base and cared little what any neutral observer might see. And Stephen Barrett, a little light-headed with the suddenness of his capture and escape—and the loss of blood—again had the feeling of desperate urgency. If Hitler & Co. wanted anything in addition to such “facilities” from Hungary, their demands must be pretty sweeping—and infamous.

Franz had been most helpful. He had produced the uniform with a smirk on his gargoyle-like face, renewed the bandage on Stephen's arm—who was gratified to see only a flesh wound—given him all the necessary instructions . . . and here he was walking through the gate, free as a swallow to go wherever he wanted—or rather wherever the car waiting for him round the corner to the left would take him. He had asked Franz what would happen to *him*, but the big man shrugged and said in a German which betrayed his Tyrolean origin: “I can run.”

Stephen had turned the corner and saw a dark saloon waiting about a hundred yards away, with a German numberplate. He was only fifty yards from it when a man came out of a door between the car and the spot he had reached. It was Schwarzwolf.

For a moment Barrett hesitated. But it would have caused immediate suspicion for a German *Generaloberst* to turn at the sight of an S.S. Group-Leader and rush away. So he kept on, trying to walk with a military swagger, thrusting out his chin and chest, staring straight ahead.

They met about twenty-five yards from the car. Schwarzwolf looked up, saluted, passed on. But suddenly Stephen heard him stopping, turning back, following him. Barrett did not increase his pace. Schwarzwolf caught up easily with him—less than ten yards from the car.

“*Herr Generaloberst* . . .” the Gestapo man began.

“Yes?” Stephen's tone was non-committal, haughty. He was glancing towards the car and thought that he recognized Furka's broad shoulders and immense back at the wheel.

“*Herr Generaloberst* . . .” started Schwarzwolf again.

“*Ja, Herr Schwarzwolf*,” answered Stephen pleasantly. “Are you out for a stroll? Can I give you a lift?”

The German's eyes became black with fury.

"You . . . you . . ." He looked around. The street was deserted. Stephen was already at the door of the car. Furka had emerged from behind the wheel and towered over the kerb. Schwarzwolf turned and began to run. Stephen jumped into the car.

"Furka," he said, "I believe in careful driving . . . but if you could run over that man I'd be willing to perjure myself in your favour. . . ."

A low, pleasant laughter greeted his words from inside the car. Furka was already at the wheel. They passed Schwarzwolf well before the corner. He was shouting and waving blindly. And Eve Budai smiled at Stephen Barrett. . . .

Stephen Barrett looked wistfully at his plate. It was empty. Baroness Eve, prettier than ever in a peasant dress with a red scarf on her dark hair, shook her head, laughing.

"No, you don't get any more," she said. "This was your third helping. You'll be sick."

"Baroness, don't forget that I fasted for almost a day. And I must nurse my strength."

Eve smiled and dipped the big spoon in the steaming kettle of Szeged *bouillebaisse*. It was late in the evening. Stephen, still a little light-headed with the loss of blood, found it hard to realize that a few hours ago he had been a prisoner in the cellar of the German Consulate, facing the nastiest death Schwarzwolf could devise—and now he was sitting on a small island in the middle of the Tisza, Szeged's swift and treacherous river, eating delicious fish-soup and being fussed over.

He had never been to Szeged before, but he had little time to admire its cathedral and main square, reminiscent of an Italian *piazza*, or study the "Hungarian Pantheon" which some well-meaning patriots had started in the arched cloisters. The car, flying the pennant of a German staff officer, made its way quickly through the centre of the town. Everywhere he saw marching German soldiers, and it gave him an ironic satisfaction that when they met his car they goose-stepped smartly with "eyes left" in honour of the *Generaloberst*. Then they passed into more provincial streets, though the names were

strangely, incongruously cosmopolitan: "London Boulevard . . . Paris Boulevard . . . Brussels Boulevard . . ." Eve explained about the terrible flood which had laid Szeged waste some sixty years ago; the cities which had contributed to the relief of the suffering population were commemorated by these street-names.

"A few miles out there," she said, pointing towards the south, "is the Yugoslav frontier. The frontier posts have been strengthened in the last few days, and there are day and night patrols with bloodhounds and searchlights. . . ."

"What do you feel about all this?" Barrett had asked. "You must have some personal opinion—quite apart from the political standing of your friends. Your father . . ."

"He believed in Europe," she interrupted him. Her voice held the hint of a sob. "He was what we called a Good European. And he thought that until Germany has been made incapable of plunging the world into war twice within a century, Europe could not find her soul. . . . I . . . I am only a woman, brought up to inherit a large estate which I never wanted. But this I feel: that we who hate the Germans, whether Magyars, Serbs, Bulgarians or Poles, must fight together. Oh, how I wish I could fight myself. . . ."

Her voice trailed away and Stephen felt reluctant to prompt her. Instead he pondered himself the events of the last twenty-four hours. Boarding the train . . . finding Lieven's luggage . . . his fight with Schwarzwolf . . . his capture . . . and release. . . . The Ragged Guard, he realized, must be a far more powerful organization than he had thought. It seemed strange that peasants, small landowners, members of the landed gentry should band together in such an uncompromising hate of Germans and Germany. . . . Yet, after all, was not the peasant, the upholder of sturdy individuality, nearest menaced by Hitler's hordes? All over Central and Eastern Europe he had to plant his crops according to the dictates of German economic experts who also fixed the prices—and paid, not in money, but in export articles for which the peasant had little use. Why was Hungary, one of the richest agricultural lands in the world, practically starving, forced to ration bread which she had not even done during the First World War? As the

Hungarian peasant was despoiled, so was the Rumanian, the Bulgarian . . . even the Serb. The Germans had turned the whole of Central and South Eastern Europe into a supply-depot for their own rapacious needs; they built up bulwarks against their own starvation so that hunger should spread in concentric rings, reaching the Reich only after all other countries had sunk to starvation level. . . . And so the Ragged Guard was born, an international organization of hard-headed tillers of the soil who had less compunction in killing a German than in squashing a harmful insect. . . .

The peasants wanted to wipe Hitler from the face of the earth; but they preferred to do it in peace, fighting the Nazis with the weapons of passive resistance, the attrition of ca'canny and sabotage. Yet Hitler forced on them the weapons of war, of open conflict. In Jugoslavia the Ragged Guard had championed surface co-operation with the Axis . . . as long as it was possible. The signature of the Tripartite Pact was too much . . . going too far. In Hungary the Ragged Guard considered the Premier too subservient to Germany, and had started its open fight at an early date. In Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, Poland . . . wherever the Ragged Guard had formed groups and cells . . . open warfare alternated with underground activities. Though some of the members—and a section of the leaders—were Communists, the whole movement was simply a reaction of the clear-headed, sturdy peasant classes to the obnoxious creed of Hitlerism.

All this Eve Budai had told Stephen during their long ride from the German Consulate in Szegeď to the upriver island where the local headquarters of the Ragged Guard was temporarily situated. She had also told him that B rries von Lieven had disappeared from the train on which Barrett had been travelling some time before it reached Szegeď. Paddy, Count Martin and two other members of the Ragged Guard had gone off to try and trace him while Eve was detailed to meet Stephen with the car. His whereabouts had been reported to them by Franz, who passed on the news to some fishermen. Hence Paddy's note and the rescue planned by Franz, who knew how to lay his hands on the impressive uniform.

Barrett had discarded that uniform, for he did not like

fancy costume. The evening was mild; the big whitewashed stove—combined with an oven—exuded comfortable warmth. He was alone with a pretty girl, and for a few minutes he forgot the war and his immediate task. He knew that he needed rest and quiet, and there seemed to be nothing to do until Paddy and the others returned. So he watched Eve's pretty, vivacious face, her blue-black hair and young, firm body. Her mind was just as attractive as her appearance; she seemed to be surprisingly mature for a girl of twenty-one. But perhaps the recent tragedy had hastened her spiritual development. They chatted about books, cities, pictures, while in the corner Furka's heavy breathing sounded a strangely reassuring noise.

Their peaceful *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the clatter of a motor-boat reaching the landing only a few yards from the cottage. A minute later Paddy, Count Martin and Katona came rushing into the warm room.

"We've found him!" cried Paddy, who seemed to take Stephen's presence as something natural.

"We *think* we have found him," Count Martin corrected the newspaperman with a smile.

"Found whom?" asked Barrett, who was a little peeved. After all, he expected some display of surprise and delight at his escape from Schwarzwolf's clutches. But these chaps seemed to take hair's-breadth escapes for everyday occurrences.

"Börries von Lieven, of course," answered Paddy. "The engine-driver of the train was in his pay. They slowed down outside Szeged and His Excellency slipped off the train in the darkness. A car or a 'plane must have picked him up. But now we have got him."

"Unless the Gestapo gets him first," said Katona grimly.

The others were silent. Outside a fisherman's voice rose in song. He was singing an old, plaintive song—a song of the rebel Magyars in the early eighteenth century:

*"O Magyar, think no German true
No matter how he flatter you:
For though his promises invoke
A letter bigger than your cloak,*

THE RAGGED GUARD

*And though he add—the big poltroon—
A seal to match the harvest moon,
You may be sure he means not well—
May Heaven blast his soul to hell!”*

All through the next day, under a sky of lead, across an endless wintry plain, the six of them drove in a Mercédès which flew the flag of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. The car belonged to Herr Balcke-Balkai and seated the five passengers comfortably. Furka, with lids drooping, drove like a giant Jehu.

They avoided the bigger towns as far as possible.

“This is a dangerous car,” explained Katona. “The Gestapo probably has its description. The peasants and decent Magyars hate the sight of this flag we carry—the flag of the Hungarian Nazis. But the Gestapo may be late in tracing us . . . and it will help us to get through army cordons. And we are hardly likely to meet other obstacles.”

The Ragged Guard leader was a little over-optimistic. As they had to keep off the main roads and avoid inhabited places, they got held up more than once. The secondary roads were in a terrible state, and Katona explained in a resentful tone that the Germans would not let the Hungarian Government spend money on any road-building unconnected with strategic necessities. “They’ll prescribe next how we should breathe!” he said, and shook his fist as if threatening an invisible but all-enveloping enemy.

The plain was endless; flat as if the whole world had been flattened by a giant demon’s foot. The telegraph poles marched across this flatness, and here and there a solitary farmstead appeared. But for most of the time they were alone with the infinite distance, the leaden sky and their own thoughts. The same desperate urgency filled all their thoughts. Perhaps it would be too late . . . perhaps when they reached Börries von Lieven’s hiding-place they would find him gone, or discover that Schwarzwolf had forestalled them. He was certainly not a man who would take a defeat like Barrett’s escape lying down—and his word was practically law in the whole country. What was pitted against him? A few thou-

sand peasants, disowned by their own Government, hunted by their own police, surrounded by potential and malignant enemies. . . . Stephen asked Paddy what Lieven's game was—why he had left the train which was to carry him and the crown to safety in Rumania? The Irish-American shrugged his shoulders.

"As far as we can make it out, the crown never got on that train. He had probably sent it to his hiding-place . . . the one we are going to visit now. He may have some deep and nasty plan of his own—blackmailing his own white-haired Nazi boys . . . offering the crown to old Mussolini for a little Italian brand of blackmail . . . or he may want to make a private deal with the Hungarian Government. I don't know. There is that smooth scoundrel, de Bardossy, ready to step into the Premier's boots and lick Hitler's. But I bet that our friend Börries is up to no good."

There was a radio in the car, and through the long drive they twirled the knobs idly. Disjointed fragments of news came over the air in nasal French, operatic Italian, guttural German or B.B.C. British. In Yugoslavia additional classes were called up for frontier guard duty, and eighty per cent of the reservists were under arms. The exodus of Germans and Italians from Belgrade had begun; thick smoke rose from the chimneys of the German Legation where von Heeren was burning his secret archives. They caught the German news transmission of the Belgrade radio which spoke of "malicious reports spread all over the world about rioting and disturbances on the day King Peter assumed full power". These reports, said the announcer, "were untrue and without foundation". M. Kosutich, the leonine Vice-President of the Croat Peasant Party, a fierce patriot, arrived in Belgrade to negotiate with the Government leaders. . . . The Vatican Radio denounced the Nazi attitude to the Church and the threat of a State religion, "based solely on the Fuehrer's will. . . . Lecturers, teachers, propagandists are inculcating pagan principles into German youth . . . the priest is treated with disrespect . . . officials are subject to disciplinary measures if they fulfil their religious duties. . . ." Another turn of the knob and a broad American accent filled the enclosed space of the car:

“ . . . coastguards boarded twenty-eight Italian ships in the morning to prevent sabotage, and also boarded two German ships. . . . The action was taken owing to the discovery that in five Italian cargo ships the crew had seriously damaged the machinery . . . it was later found that twenty ships were damaged. The crews were arrested. . . . ”

The flick of a finger brought new and newer reports of the world's fatal sickness, and the great blood-letting. Malaya spoke of strong reinforcements which had arrived from Great Britain. . . . “ Woebegone ” Ansaldo wailed that the position of the Duce's African Empire had become “ more delicate ”; the Greeks told of the 23,000 Italian prisoners taken in Albania; while Berlin found nothing better than to warn Vichy against a “ possible British attack ” on Dakar.

It was a queer feeling, to sit in the swiftly speeding car and listen to the confused murmur of the world. They crossed and recrossed the winding Tisza, sometimes by incredibly precarious bridges. They lunched in a copse on the outskirts of Mezőtúr, a little market town famous for its peasant genius of a potter; but they had little time to rest. Furka was again at the wheel, looking half-asleep but driving with the precision of an automaton. In the afternoon the wind rose, chasing fine particles of dust across the plain. On and on they went, skirting the towns of the *Kuns*, that strange Asiatic tribe which had mingled with the Magyars after trying to relapse into a pagan past, crossing the large grassy desert of the Hortobágy, the most famous cattle and horse preserve of Hungary, following the line of the Tisza until they came to its tributary, the Sajó, and turned towards the town of Miskolc.

Dusk was falling rapidly when they reached the outskirts of this rowdy and untidy town, not so long ago close to the frontier, a meeting-place of smugglers and spies, surrounded by hills and close to the big iron-works at Diósgyőr. They were challenged in the suburbs by a Magyar sentry. Apparently they were entering a military zone. Balcke-Balkai's car was well provided with passes and papers; Katona produced them with airy nonchalance and the sentry seemed to be satisfied. Furka was just switching on the engine when an officer stepped from the small guard-house. The sentry sprang to

attention and explained in a low voice who the passengers of the car were. The officer took the papers, looked at them idly, walked with a swagger to the car and asked:

"Have you got your retaining papers?"

"Retaining papers? I don't know what you mean, Herr Major," said Katona, giving him a sudden promotion by way of subtle flattery. But the officer was not impressed by this courtesy.

"Haven't you heard the wireless announcement?" he asked. "All private cars to be confiscated for army use with the exception of those granted a 'retaining' permit. Have you got it?"

"How could I?" asked Katona. "I never heard of this new regulation. But if you tell me where I can get the requisite paper . . ."

"I am afraid it's too late now," the officer said curtly. "The ignorance of the law is no excuse. I must ask you to surrender the car and continue your journey by other means."

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," protested Katona. "I am certainly not going to give up my lawful property. Can't we settle this in some other way?"

"What other way?" asked the officer with a nasty edge to his voice. But he never received a reply. Katona had touched Furka's shoulder and the Mercédès leapt forward. Its offside wing touched the officer who jumped back. By the time the first shot rang out they were three hundred yards away. Half a dozen bullets sang above the roof of the car, but the soldiers seemed to be poor marksmen, or perhaps the guard had been summoned in a hurry and had no time to aim properly.

"Now the fat's in the fire," remarked Paddy. But his voice held more exultation than anxiety.

"Will they follow us?" asked Count Martin.

"I don't think anything they've got can catch up with us," answered Katona. "They might 'phone to the guard-house at the other end of the town—but we can make a detour."

He gave Furka some instructions and the car began to twist and turn through squalid side-streets. Gipsies stood in the doors of hovel-like houses, staring at the big car. Once they

missed a hay-cart by inches, and once someone jumped into the middle of the road to stop them—jumping back again to save his skin in the nick of time. It was a mad ride especially as Furka's silence ended suddenly and he began to sing in a powerful bass voice. Speed had probably intoxicated him . . . and he sang in defiance of the soldiers, the bad roads and the threatening danger.

The detour brought them out among some wooded hills on a road which was hardly more than a track. A less competent driver would have landed them in a ditch, but Furka seemed to have grown to the wheel. They began to climb through an oak forest. The powerful headlights cut a swathe of brilliance into the night.

"Have we far to go?" asked Eve who had been silent for the last hour or so, as if preoccupied with her own private thoughts.

"Not very far," answered Paddy. "According to the reports which we received Lieven's hide-out is only half a mile from the Palota Hotel at Lillafured."

"Lillafured?" repeated Barrett. "I seem to have heard the name before."

"It's just a few miles beyond Miskolc," explained Katona. "Rather high up among the mountains with a lake, a waterfall and some ancient caves. The Hungarian Government has built a big hotel there in the hope of attracting foreign tourists, but it wasn't much of a success. . . ."

"Oh, yes, I remember now," smiled Barrett. "Wasn't the hotel nicknamed 'Prelate's Folly'?"

He recalled the tale as told to him by a somewhat disgruntled Magyar journalist—about a Minister of Health and Public Welfare who was also a prelate of the Catholic Church. This worthy gentleman liked good living and his main hobby was hunting. When he discovered that the territory he rented was miles away from the nearest town and decent accommodation, he persuaded his Government to build a palatial hotel at a comfortable distance. In order to justify this huge expenditure, he bribed some experts to declare that important mineral springs were hidden on the spot. The hotel was built—and afterwards they started to bore for the springs. As far as

Barrett knew they were still boring—the mineral springs refused to come to the surface, having never been there. But His Excellency had his hotel where he could find good food and a soft bed after a hard day's hunting. . . . Pity that the eminent pillar of the Church died a few months after the hotel was opened—an immense white elephant whose upkeep cost more than any tourist trade could net. . . .

A strange country, he mused, this Hungary. Full of contradictions. High-spirited, austere Puritans like the man with the tired face he had met only . . . oh, what a long time ago it seemed now! Death-defying zealots of freedom like the leaders of the Ragged Guard. Wonderful thoroughbreds like the girl at his side and the young Count. . . . Queer survivals of the Renaissance like His Excellency the hunting prelate. . . . Fanatics who would link themselves to the Devil of Nazism to recover lost territories. Greasy opportunists and gentle poets. . . . A country which deserved a better fate than its leaders were preparing for it once the present Prime Minister had fallen. . . .

A sudden turn of the track brought them to a grassy plateau. Katona touched Furka's shoulder. The car stopped.

"I think we'd better continue on foot," the Ragged Guard leader said. "We are too near and the car would make too much noise." He might have added: ". . . and we might break our necks!" For the track, leading across the plateau, plunged abruptly into a deep canyon. They stopped at the edge, and Katona pointed to the left where the canyon broadened into a small valley. Lights were blazing there, though little else could be seen in the darkness.

"That's Lieven's place," he said. "It looks as if it were quite a distance away, but there's a short cut to it. I wonder though why he has put on all his lights and forgot to draw the curtains. One would think that he would not wish to advertise his presence. . . ."

It was Furka who led the way, stepping sure-footed over roots and stones, giving a hand to Eve whenever necessary. After a few yards the path curved sharply to the left. Its soil was soft and slippery; they had to be careful on the steep slope. Fifteen minutes brought them to the bottom of the

canyon, and now the lights blazed only a few hundred yards ahead.

"I think I'd better go and reconnoitre," whispered Katona.

"I am coming with you," said Barrett. He felt that he had been inactive long enough.

"All right," the Hungarian assented. He turned to Furka and said something to him in Magyar. The giant nodded. "Wait for half an hour," Katona told Count Martin. "If we don't turn up by then, follow us. We may be walking into a trap . . . though I don't think so. Lieven couldn't have had any warning. Otherwise one of us will be coming back for you. . . ."

He and Barrett crept forward, keeping close together. It was very dark. A damp, fresh smell rose from the earth, the smell of spring. The two men covered the short distance noiselessly. They fetched up against a stone wall.

"The garden's got a hedge," breathed Katona against Stephen's ear. "We can slip through there."

When they had passed through the hedge they found themselves in the front garden. It was lit up by two windows through which the light inside the house escaped in a broad flood. Katona was a master stalker, and Barrett himself could not be called a novice in the art. They skirted the wide path of light and reached the house undetected. They were too near to talk, but Stephen saw the Hungarian shake his head as if he disliked this too easy access. Then they were both at the window, and stared into a room which must have been a study for it was lined with bookcases. There was a big, flat desk in the middle. All the lights were blazing yet there was no sign of life inside. Katona reached up and touched the window. It yielded to his touch, opening inwards. The next moment he had vaulted across the window-sill. Barrett followed him.

They both stopped just inside the room. The desk had hidden from their sight the silent, motionless figure stretched on the carpet, between the door and the fireplace. A pool of blood had formed a reddish-brown halo around the head.

Freiherr Börries von Lieven, Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary, was dead. He had been shot, but he

could not have died immediately, for there were bloodstains between the desk and the spot where he had collapsed. One arm was flung out, the hand pointing mutely, stiffly towards the door. Pointing the way where his murderers had left? Barrett stooped down to pick up a crumpled, dirty sheet of paper which was lying close to the pointing finger. He had just time to slip it into his pocket when Katona's hand gripped his arm like a vice. Stephen stiffened.

Words of command rang out in the night outside. Heavy feet moved. Weapons clattered.

Though he could not understand the words, Barrett realized what was happening. A platoon of soldiers was surrounding the house. Some of them were coming inside. It would have been both senseless and undignified to try and hide in a building of which they did not know the plan. So they just stood and waited—Katona with an impassive face which gradually paled and Stephen with a slight, almost amused smile.

Just before the door opened Katona's fingers touched again Stephen's arm. Their touch was light and uneven. It took him a moment to realize that the Hungarian was trying to give him a wordless warning, a last-minute message. Long and short, the pressure changed. Morse. . . . — — . . . — . . .

— . — . . . — . . . — — . . . — . — . . . — — . . . — . . . — . . . — . . . — . . .

It all took less than a minute and a half. "*Sprich deutsch. Weiss nichts,*" he repeated to himself. "Speak German. Know nothing." This was explicit enough.

It was a middle-aged officer with a scarred face who stumped into the room. He stopped short, stared at the body and then roared to the two soldiers who had appeared behind them:

"Take them away. Put them with the others. . . ."

Stephen was standing as close to the barred window as he could get, waiting for the dawn. It would be the dawn of the last day of March, a month of violent passions, of flood and sudden death. From the depths of the cell came the heavy snoring of Furka and the lighter, even breathing of Katona and Count Martin. A few minutes ago Barrett himself had

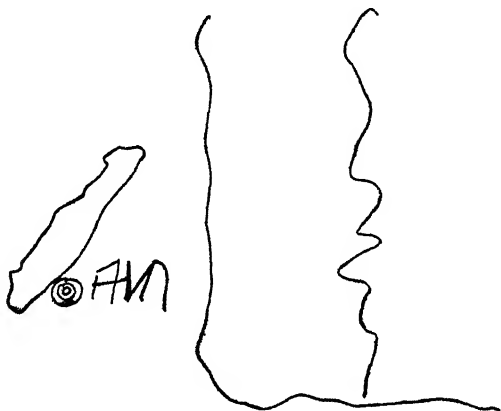
been asleep; but he possessed the rare talent of acting as his own alarm-clock and had timed himself to wake just before dawn. Paddy had disappeared; he was not in the disconsolate little group which Barrett and Katona had joined outside Lieven's mountain retreat. Eve was taken to a different cell in the military prison of Miskolc to which the whole party of "assassins" had been brought. There had been no formal charge proffered against them, but the officer with the scarred face had openly shown that he considered the lot of them dangerous bandits. He refrained from handcuffing them only because handcuffs were not provided in the regulation equipment of the Hungarian Army. Yet it was ominous enough that the police seemed to have nothing to do with their arrest, for it was the Army—at least its officers—which had become infected most readily with the brown poison of the Third Reich. Katona was silent, Furka impassive, Count Martin haggard during the long, jogging ride back to Miskolc. Eve's eyes looked enormous in her pale, tired face. Lieven murdered, the crown gone . . . God knew where . . . the Ragged Guard's plans foiled . . . no, not even Paddy's probable escape seemed to offer any consolation. He would be picked up sooner or later—his height and red hair made him conspicuous enough. . . .

And yet Barrett threw off the thoughts of dull despair like a swimmer stripping for the plunge throws away his clothes. He could have given no rational reason for his trust in . . . what? A miracle? Nothing less than a miracle could save them . . . could save the cause for which they were fighting in this unhappy, strife-torn country.

The only slender thread of hope was represented in the small, dirty piece of paper he had picked up from the floor, an inch or so from Lieven's cold fingers. He had had no time to look at it before the soldiers broke into the room, and the cell was left in darkness. That was the reason why he was waiting for the dawning light, seeping slowly through the bars. He did not know why, but he expected some revelation from this piece of paper . . . some message which would help him and his companions. . . .

Now the light was strong enough. He spread out the

crumpled scrap of paper and stared at it with a puzzled frown. There were only a few lines, drawn clumsily, unsteadily—and two letters. Not much to go by. And yet . . . He examined the paper with even closer attention. The marks on it had been made in blood . . . reddish-brown stuff which had dried unevenly. How melodramatic! Börries von Lieven's last message to the world . . . a message of blood.



Stephen hesitated for a moment. Then he walked across to where Katona was sleeping and touched his shoulder. The Ragged Guard leader opened his eyes and sat up silently. He was instantly alert. Barrett bent down.

"I want you to look at something. Come to the window."

Katona nodded, and Stephen smoothed out once more the piece of paper with the uneven, reddish-brown scrawl.

"Does it mean anything to you?"

The Magyar stared at the paper with narrowed eyes.

"No, I don't think so. Not at first glance, anyhow. What is it?"

"I found it near Lieven's body. Somehow I think it is a clue . . . a pointer . . . perhaps to the whereabouts of the crown."

"Oh!" Katona took the piece of paper into his own hand and studied it closely.

"Too elementary to be a map," he said. "And then . . .

those two letters . . . AV . . . isn't it? . . . and a third, half finished . . . it may be A again or an incomplete O . . . practically anything. I . . . wait a moment . . ."

He was visibly excited now while he traced lightly the two more or less parallel lines. He murmured something to himself in Magyar and then slapped his forehead.

"Of course! How stupid I am! That must be it!"

"So you think it's a clue?" asked Stephen.

"That I don't know. But these two almost parallel lines—they are our two main rivers. On the left the Danube, on the right the Tisza—or west and east if you want the compass definition. Of course it's very roughly drawn. Then that irregular shape on the left or western bank of the Danube must be our big lake, the Balaton. . . ."

He examined the paper once again, and shook his head.

"But I must confess I don't know what those three concentric rings mean. And I am sure there is no place on the shores of Lake Balaton whose name begins with AV. . . . We have got a watering-place called Aliga . . . but that's on the north-western shore. . . ."

"Well, whatever place he meant, it must be along the lake," Stephen remarked. "If you recognized the two rivers and the rest, he must have known that it would be clear to read for anyone familiar enough with the geography of Hungary. Though I wonder why he left such a message . . . and for whom. . . ."

Katona offered no suggestions. Stephen shrugged and put the paper away. They had been searched, but this was undertaken by a sergeant without much expert knowledge and it wasn't difficult to hide one or two useful objects. Not that anything could really help them—except some miracle. They had been told that as they had "committed the murder" or were accomplices to it in a military zone under a state of emergency, they would be tried by court martial. "The minimum penalty is death," the officer with the scarred face had said, visibly licking his chops, "though loss of citizenship rights and expulsion might also be added." Stephen pondered the strange jurisprudence of a country which first executed a man and then robbed him of his rights to citizen-

ship—but the whole problem seemed to be far too academic. He only knew that he and his companions were in a nasty hole, and that more than their personal survival depended on their immediate future. . . .

When they came to fetch them it was late afternoon, though the light was still strong enough and a freshly laundered sky promised sunshine for the morning. They were lined up in front of their cell along a narrow, cold corridor and waited until a policewoman brought Eve along. Before she could stop her, the girl slipped to Count Martin's side. Their fingers met, and though the four soldiers forming the escort looked dubious, they made no effort to separate the two. The five prisoners were marched across a sadly barren courtyard to the gates of the prison. Outside a closed car was waiting; when they all got in they were very uncomfortably crowded. There were no blinds on the car and they drove off towards the Miskolc Division Headquarters—at least that was Katona's whispered theory—where the court martial was to take place. There was something furtive and hurried about the whole thing, and Stephen could well understand the idea of their captors, who wanted to get rid of the "conspirators" before the powerful forces which the Ragged Guard and Count Martin's friends could mobilize would have time to act.

Stephen was wedged in between a huge soldier with a stupid, vacant face and another who looked like a surprised weasel. It seemed to be impossible to move let alone make a serious attempt of escape. Perhaps later . . . in the court-room . . . or before . . . before they were led to the place of execution. Would they spare Eve? But then he realized that they could not spare any member of their company—it would be too dangerous. It seemed such a pitiful waste that Count Martin and Eve should die. Katona was a sort of soldier, always prepared for such an end. So was Furka. As for himself—well, this had to happen sooner or later and he'd had a pretty long run. . . . He had no kith nor kin to mourn him, and he wasn't indispensable in the organization where the only reward was the mere continuance of existence. . . .

The car turned now into the broad main street. But it had

progressed for less than a hundred yards when a detachment of soldiers emerged from a side-street. The driver had to slow down and then stop to let them pass.

They were a platoon of Hungarian infantry, sturdy peasant lads but tired and dust-covered. They were half-way across the street when suddenly a German N.C.O. in a steel helmet stepped from the kerb. He was followed by half a dozen German soldiers. They were not in formation and their actions seemed strangely illogical: instead of crossing the street parallel with the Hungarian platoon, they turned to the right and tried to cut across the ranks. There was some confusion and then the German N.C.O.'s voice rose sharply:

" Aus dem Weg, du Schwein! "

The soldier whom he addressed as a pig, demanding that he should get out of his way, tried to keep step and walk on. But the German pushed him. No one could tell how it had happened or who had started it, but in a few seconds there was a general mêlée. The Hungarians, outraged by the unwarranted impudence of the Germans, forgot their discipline. The Germans seemed to enjoy the fight for its own sake. The driver of the prisoners' car sounded his horn impatiently, but the brawlers did not seem to hear. He could not drive into the dense mass of fighting humanity, and behind him other cars and carts were piled up in a traffic jam which spread for several hundred yards.

The fighting drew nearer and nearer to the car. And now Stephen discerned a queer chant rising above the hubbub, a sort of rhythmic war-cry, repeated again and again. His sharp ears caught its meaning before the others did.

" Knockout yourguards! Knockout yourguards! Knockout yourguards! "

It was a strange war-cry for German soldiers having a brawl with their Hungarian allies, but it was good advice. Stephen's left fist shot out and fetched the big, vacuous-faced soldier a sickening blow on the chin. At the same time, or a second later, his right hand grasped the neck of the thin, weasel-like creature on his other side. He pushed down his head, pressing with all his strength. From the corner of his eye he saw that Furka, Katona and Count Martin were also getting on with

the good work. The driver was already out and the other two soldiers were reduced to shouts for help which no one heeded in the outside tumult. Though space was very restricted, it hindered their guards even more than themselves—they could not use their weapons and they were not used to “unarmed combat”.

The front doors of the car flew open on both sides at the same moment. By this time the fighting overflowed on the pavements; civilians had entered it with gusto and it had become a real free-for-all. When Stephen jumped out of the car, he stumbled over two apprentices in long green aprons who were belabouring each other with considerable enjoyment. German and Hungarian had become mixed up inseparably. Two gendarmes were in the thick of the fighting, their tall hats with the cocks' feathers floating above the other bobbing heads. Then a strange thing happened. Slowly but steadily the Germans fought their way from the middle of the crowd. Some of them grabbed the members of the party which had escaped from the car. Others chucked the four Hungarian soldiers and the driver from it. Stephen, Furka, Count Martin and Katona struggled at first, but a whispered word made each of them submit. Eve was carried aloft, her loosened hair like a dark oriflamme, right to the door and deposited with great care on the back seat. Stephen himself was half pushed, half dragged to the place next to the driver's, and the German N.C.O. slithered behind the wheel. Two of the German soldiers found space inside, and two leapt on each side of the broad running-boards. Then, with a sharp blast of the horn, the car began to move forward. The closely packed crowd opened instinctively in front of it. At first its progress was slow, but gradually the man at the wheel accelerated. He made a sharp turn, then another, and the main street with its fighting, swaying figures, its bedlam of noise and movement disappeared behind them.

The car drove on with suicidal speed until they were well clear of the town. How the four soldiers on the running-boards had held on remained a puzzle to Stephen to the end of his days. But they did, and now they jumped down, opening the doors. The car was in the middle of a maize-field, bordered

by a thick hedge. The German N.C.O. climbed from the car and threw off his helmet, his fingers already busy with his coat. His hair was red and his voice laughing, lilting:

"Begorra, it was a foine fight, me lads—wasn't it now? A pity it didn't last longer!"

"Where are we going, Paddy?" asked Stephen.

The Irishman spun the wheel sharply. The company of adventurers was again on its own. The six "German soldiers", after shedding their uniforms, had vanished on mysterious errands. Of course they were all members of the Ragged Guard. Apparently after Paddy had slipped through the cordon of soldiers thrown around Lieven's hide-out, he had made his way to Miskolc and telephoned the Twelve Apostles. Balcke-Balkai made the "necessary dispositions". They knew that Stephen and his companions would be transferred to the military prison in Miskolc; as a matter of fact a few "harmless" shepherd boys had followed them as closely as they could, passing the news of their whereabouts from village to village, from valley to mountain-top. Balkai and Paddy decided that it was hopeless to try and storm the prison which was too heavily guarded. Their only chance was to create a disturbance when the prisoners had left it—their only fear that the court martial and execution would take place within the barracks. There was, however, little chance of that, for the Hungarians loved to cling to formality and the divisional headquarters of the Miskolc Army Corps were near enough. It was just the foolhardy *coup* Paddy loved—and he had staged his little melodrama skilfully enough. Here they were, all hale and hearty and free—nothing wrong except the fact that the Gestapo and the whole Hungarian Army was hunting them, not to speak of the police and any other odd people who might join in the chase. . . .

"Where are we going, Paddy?" asked Stephen a second time.

"To the only possible hiding-place—Lieven's house," replied the newspaperman. "They'll look for us everywhere—except in that one spot, I think."

"But what if they left a guard?" asked Count Martin.

"What for? The murder has been done, the trap has been sprung, the crown has vanished—they have no reason to guard an empty shell."

"What do you mean by 'the trap has been sprung'? " asked Barrett. "I wish you wouldn't talk in clichés like the oracle at Delphi. At least not all the time."

"Sorry," grinned the Irishman. "But we haven't had much time for explanations. Balkai found out that Schwarzwolf tipped off the Army people to look out for us at Lieven's place. Of course he didn't tell them that he was planning to do a little quiet murder and robbery himself. He or one of his men killed Lieven, got away with the crown . . . and then let us all walk into the trap. A nice fellow, ain't he? "

"I'd like to put my hands on him . . . just for a few minutes," said Stephen thoughtfully. His quiet voice betrayed no emotion, but Paddy knew his friend.

"You usually get your way, Valentino," he chuckled. "I hope your wishdream will be soon fulfilled. . . ."

It was a comparatively short trip from Miskolc to Lieven's villa; of course now, in daylight, they made it much quicker than the night before. Paddy stopped the car on the other side of the ravine, in a small copse which camouflaged it effectively enough. Furka, who volunteered to spy out the terrain, returned to report that the Lieven house was shuttered and seemed to be deserted; no guards anywhere. In single file the whole party descended the steep mountainside. The lock on the back-door was a simple one; it took Stephen less than five minutes to pick it. The house was empty; the study with its shuttered windows seemed to be a musty haunting ground of recent ghosts. Lieven's body had been removed, though the blood spots were still staining the carpet, and Eve shuddered when she glanced down. The "company of adventurers" scattered along the book-lined walls, in comfortable chairs and settees. They switched on only a small lamp, for of course they did not dare to open the shutters.

"Now," said Paddy, "I propose to have a meal. The larder is certain to be well stocked. Furka, go and see."

"I . . . I couldn't eat," protested Eve. "Not right here. . . ."

"Who said anything about eating here?" argued Paddy. "His Nibs certainly ran to a dining-room, and there's no need to scrimp ourselves of his hospitality. . . ."

He refused to "talk business" before they had fed, and they all discovered how famished they were when Furka—his huge figure partly covered by a white apron—called them to table. He had improvised an excellent meal from the late and unlamented Freiherr's larder, and they had some Bull's Blood to drink with it—a smooth and potent Hungarian red wine, first cousin to Imperial Tokay.

After the men had lit their cigarettes, pipes or cigars, Paddy leaned back in his chair and said:

"Well . . . where do we go from here?"

"Nowhere . . . at least not together," answered Barrett. "You can imagine that our descriptions will be posted all over Hungary within an hour."

"Couldn't we stay here for a day or two?" asked Count Martin. "By that time the hue and cry might have died away and . . ."

"What day is it to-day?" asked Stephen.

"Monday, the thirty-first of March," replied Katona.

"The thirty-first of March, Count!" repeated Stephen. "Have you forgotten that the election of the new Guardians of the Crown is fixed for the second of April? We have about forty-eight hours to recover the crown . . . seventy-two if we are lucky."

Count Martin blushed.

"I . . . I had forgotten it for the moment. But what can we do? The crown has vanished. . . . Lieven had tried to keep it for his own dark purposes, but he was killed . . . by this time Schwarzwolf must be well over the frontier with it."

"I don't think so," Katona interposed. "I am sure that after the anxiety which von Lieven's attempt at double-crossing must have caused him, he wouldn't trust the crown to anyone but himself. And his orders, as we found out, were to stay in Hungary and watch developments. He only followed Lieven because he was not sure about his trustworthiness. It is much likelier that he is lying low somewhere in the country . . . where he can watch and guide everything himself. . . ."

"Yes, but where?" asked Eve. "We cannot search the whole of Hungary in forty-eight hours."

"I don't think we need to do that," smiled Barrett. "Unless I am very much mistaken, Börries von Lieven did us *one* good turn. Katona knows of it already—though there was no time to discuss it with the others. Lieven left a clue . . . which I believe points to Schwarzwolf's hiding-place. I might be mistaken . . . but unless we have a contrary report from the Ragged Guard, we must follow it up. . . ."

He produced the crumpled piece of paper and the others crowded around him.

"Our friend Katona," Stephen continued, "has already found an explanation for this crude drawing. Apparently the two more or less parallel lines represent the Danube and the Tisza. This worm-like shape is Lake Balaton. But the three concentric circles and the letters AV—something still puzzle us. . . ."

"But if this is a map," objected Count Martin, "it won't help us much. Even if we reach the south-eastern shore of the lake, there are many places there, and we may search for weeks without results."

"We haven't got weeks," said Barrett. "We have forty-eight hours—probably less. And we must discover this place . . . either by making enquiries on the spot . . . or by narrowing down the field . . . finding an explanation for the concentric circles and the two letters. . . ."

He passed the piece of paper round, but though all the members of the company inspected it in turn no one could offer a constructive suggestion.

Stephen rose.

"I am going back to the study," he announced. "Anybody like to keep me company?"

But no one seemed to be particularly anxious to do so. Furka murmured something to the effect that someone must be on the look-out for any outside surprise. Paddy declared that he was sleepy, while Katona planned to try and reach some of the local members of the Ragged Guard in the village near Lillafüred. As for Count Martin and Baroness Eve, they were lost in a private and apparently entrancing discussion of their

own, and presently they vanished into the garden.

So Stephen went back to the study alone. He switched on the small lamp and, discovering that it had a long flex, began to move with it around the well-filled shelves until he found an atlas. He thumbed through it, looking for a fair-scale map of Hungary. He found one which looked recent enough and settled down with it in a comfortable armchair.

Lieven's death-message was spread over the lower half of the map. He tried to decide what place the rough sketch indicated. The south-eastern shore of the lake was quite flat according to the map—so the three concentric circles could not stand for a mountain. His finger slid down the shore of the lake, ticking off the strangely sounding Hungarian names. Balatonaliga . . . Balatonszabadi . . . Siófok . . . Zamárdi . . . Szántód . . . Balatonszárszó . . . Balatonszemes . . . Balatonlelle . . . yes, the place he was looking for, if Lieven's sketch could be accepted as anything approaching reality, must be somewhere between Balatonlelle and a place called Balatonberény. There was only one village or little town marked between the two . . . it was called Fonyód. But that meant no great progress . . . for there was a distance of several dozen miles from Balatonlelle to Balatonberény . . . and Lieven's "clue" might be pointing to any spot within a large triangle. No, the clue must be in the concentric circles and the letters AV?

Stephen decided to rest his mind a little. He was not a man who liked plodding, painstaking research. He thought Sherlock Holmes rather a bore and never read detective stories in which the sleuth pieced together the motive, opportunity and means of the crime by patient persistence. His mind was like a grasshopper: it worked in jumps. He used to say that as long as he produced results, it was nobody's business how he did it. His white-haired chief often called him a bone-lazy fellow who was blessed with incredible luck, and should have been dead a dozen times over if the laws of nature had not been revised every instance in his favour. But Barrett never analysed himself; he simply went on.

Now he stretched himself on the broad settee and closed his eyes. He had no intention of going to sleep; yet the last few

days had been gruelling enough and he dozed off. Almost instantly he was plunged into a vivid dream, consisting mainly of a chase. Schwarzwolf with a big party of S.S. men was pursuing him along the Siegesallee, that abomination of bad taste in the centre of Berlin, lined with the statues of the German past. Not only was Stephen flying for his life . . . by some queer compulsion he was forced to identify each statue as he fled. The marble horrors stared at him in disdain. His pursuers were at his heels; he could hear Schwarzwolf's voice urging them on when Frederick the Great suddenly stepped from his pedestal and said in a clear, cold voice: "Excuse me, but this is not the right way to run. When the Avars wanted to escape from their pursuers, they ran in concentric circles. Don't you remember? The Avars . . ."

"Yes, Your Majesty," answered Stephen in his dream. "But what use is it running in concentric circles? They catch you all the same. . . ."

"Idiot!" cried Frederick the Great sternly. He raised his stick and brought it down on Schwarzwolf's head who had by now come abreast with them. Schwarzwolf winced and clutched Stephen's arm. "The Avars!" shouted Frederick the Great. "The Avars!" But Schwarzwolf was shaking Stephen's arm and his attention was distracted. He tried to free himself, jerked his arm away . . . and woke.

Paddy was bending over him.

"What's the matter with you, Bluebeard?" he asked anxiously. "You were screaming at the top of your voice. If you had had lobster now, I could understand. But I thought your digestion . . ."

Stephen blinked and sat up.

"What was I screaming, Paddy?"

"God knows," the Irish-American replied. "Something like awash or away . . . I didn't catch it. . . ."

"I got it!" shouted Barrett and jumped to his feet. "I got it!"

While Paddy was shaking his head and muttering something about a sudden fit of insanity, he rushed to the bookshelves and ran his hand along them until he found an encyclopædia. He leafed through it for the paragraph he wanted:

"*Avars*. Tribe or group of tribes. They came from Asia into Europe, where the Emperor Justinian made use of them to conquer the Bulgarians. They settled down in Pannonia, the modern Hungary, and were very troublesome neighbours to the Byzantine Empire, as well as to the Franks, Lombards and other peoples to the west of them. In 796 Charlemagne put an end to their raids. They built their fortresses or camps in three concentric rings, throwing up mounds where they could not find a natural elevation, and surrounded each ring with a moat or ditch. Later they were conquered and destroyed or absorbed by the Magyars. . . . Their funeral customs . . ."

"Concentric rings, Paddy!" yelled Stephen. "Do you hear? Concentric rings! All we have to do . . ."

Katona and Furka came hurrying into the room, alarmed at his loud voice. He turned to them, his arms flung out, his eyes shining.

"We must leave at once!" he cried. "I think I know where Schwarzwolf is hiding! And the crown must be there!"

Paddy tugged at his sleeve.

"Come down to earth, playboy! All this is Greek to us!"

"It's as clear as daylight!" argued Stephen. "The letters AV stand for AVARS. The three concentric rings mark the site of some ancient Avar camp along Lake Balaton. All we have to do is to discover where the remains of such a camp are on the south-eastern shore of the lake . . . there cannot be so many, I am sure . . . and we have found Schwarzwolf and the crown!"

There was pity in the Irishman's eyes when he looked at his friend.

"You know how far Lake Balaton is from here? About two hundred miles as the crow flies. And we aren't crows. We can't use the car—it's as conspicuous as a honeymoon couple. Do you propose to walk? Two hundred miles in a night? Really, Stephen, you're hopeless."

But Barrett was hardly listening to him. He turned to Katona:

"I want you to set your people in motion. Have you got any near Lake Balaton?"

"Thousands," nodded the Hungarian. "Mostly wine-growers or small farmers. I can reach them . . . though it may take some time."

"It mustn't take more than an hour. Ask them whether they know anything about an old Avar camp or fortress somewhere between Balatonlelle and Berény. . . . Furka, find Count Martin and Eve. . . . Paddy, search the house for any arms. I'd like to have a couple of revolvers . . . but even a poker would be useful. And don't argue! We must get there and we're going to get there!"

The last day of March ended and it was All Fools' Day. King Peter dissolved the Senate and appointed new governors for the Serb provinces. His Press Chief was preparing a detailed denial of German reports screaming about disorders and atrocities against the German minority in the Voivodina. Factories, not connected with war work, were closed. *Pravda* declared that if the U.S.S.R. Government did not send congratulations to Yugoslavia, this was "an omission—perhaps they just didn't think of them, though there would have been nothing extraordinary in sending them. . . ." A hundred German and eight hundred Italian seamen were arrested in the United States where the President was faced with strikes in Wisconsin, Illinois, Alabama and Indiana. The Yugoslav Minister to Moscow had a long conference in Ankara. Mexico took Axis vessels into custody; Peruvian troops occupied the *Lufthansa* airfield at Lima-Tambo. Mr. Matsuoka saw Mussolini and Ciano, declaring later in a speech that the Tripartite Pact was "the symbol of the ascending movement of humanity concluded with perspicacity and imposed by Herculean will. . . ." In Hungary eight divisions of the Army were moved to the neighbourhood of Szeged, ready for action "in a southerly direction". The German News Agency grew hysterical about "uncontrollable agitators in Yugoslavia who set fire to villages, beat women, murder people and drive out the Germans. . . ." Bremen and Emden were attacked by British aircraft and the Germans retaliated by bombing

Newquay and the Midlands. Spring stirred slowly in Europe—but it was to be a spring of new carnage, death and destruction.

The railway station at Miskolc was heavily guarded by troops. Motor-cyclists patrolled the roads leading into and out of the town. Gendarmes walked the country lanes. The machinery of law and order—and the Gestapo machinery of torture and murder—had been set in motion to trap a group of adventurers who dared to defy the dark plans of Himmler & Co. A handful of Ragged Guard members were arrested all over Hungary; but the men on whom Schwarzwolf and his gang particularly wanted to lay hands escaped mysteriously. In Budapest Balcke-Balkai handed the keys of the Twelve Apostles to his head-waiter and vanished into the blue fifteen minutes before the police came to arrest him.

And in Miskolc a party of gipsies boarded a slow train for Budapest. There was only one woman with them—an old, toothless crone with a mahogany skin and greasy black hair. She was accompanied by two men—one a huge fellow, the other a smaller, wiry man. At a small station outside the town three more gipsies got on the train, but they sat in a different compartment than the first party and did not attempt to join them. They were all dressed in nondescript clothes with a splash of colour in their sashes and kerchiefs. The other passengers left them severely alone, for gipsies were thieving and unreliable folk; and, strangely enough, these gipsies were silent and did not attempt their usual confidence tricks or fortune-telling. They just huddled in their corner and went to sleep.

It was a long trip to Budapest with the slow local train. Once two gendarmes passed the entire length of it, but they gave little more than a passing glance to the gipsies—though usually gipsy and gendarme are born enemies in Hungary. The train steamed into the Eastern Railway Station and there the gipsies melted away, swallowed up by hurrying crowds. They emerged again, still in two separate groups, strolling along the broad St. Stephen Boulevard until they came to the graceful Margaret Bridge. Here they sauntered down the steps leading to the Danube quay. It was deserted; shipping

on the Danube had not yet been freed from the ice and the buildings alongside the river were locked up. The gipsies sat down on the stone steps and produced food from their small bundles, wrapped in garish shawls.

And now the old woman laughed. Her laughter was pure silver, young and carefree.

"God, I look a fright!" she said. "Now I know, Stephen, why you wouldn't let me see a mirror before we started!"

"I am glad you find my handiwork satisfactory," the man replied. "Though the credit for the idea is all yours. . . ."

Yes, it had been Eve Budai's idea that the party should adopt the gipsy disguise. For weren't gipsies the only people left in Hungary whose comings and goings, whose constant travelling caused no attention at all—because they had been on the move for centuries and never stayed long in one place? Even so, they had to change their personal appearance as much as possible. Eve's young radiant beauty was turned under Stephen's skilful fingers into repulsive old age. Her hair vanished under a coarse wig. Paddy, too, had to hide his red hair. Katona and his shepherd boys had proved invaluable in gathering all the necessary things within a very short time, and so the party was ready to leave late at night. Furka seemed to be at home in the wide-sleeved gipsy shirt and the shiny black trousers; nor had Katona or Count Martin any difficulty in adjusting themselves to their new characters. Paddy and Stephen found it more of a task, but after all both had some experience in play-acting and the main thing was to keep their mouths shut. In his eagerness to be off Stephen did not wait for the information which he had asked Katona to procure for him—hence this short stop at Budapest, a grey city now in a frosty sunshine, betraying little of the excitement which throbbed underneath her everyday appearance.

There were steps behind the gipsies, but they did not turn their heads. A peasant woman, dressed in many voluminous petticoats and a big black shawl, walked towards them from the direction of the bridge. She had two empty baskets on her arms, showing that she had brought up some foodstuffs for the market half a mile farther down along the river. When she came abreast of the motley group, she bent down to deal

with a loose shoe-lace. Then she straightened and walked on. A small piece of paper remained on the stones where she had stopped. Katona—a most disreputable-looking gipsy—reached out to collect it. He unfolded the paper, then tore it into small pieces and dropped it into the sluggish Danube. He rose, sauntered over to where Stephen was sitting with Eve and Furka and said:

“The only place where there is one is Fonyód.”

Stephen jumped to his feet.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s take the earliest train.”

The gipsies moved on. A policeman eyed them suspiciously, but there seemed to be no reason to interfere with them. They crossed the Margaret Bridge and turned towards the Southern Railway Station whence the trains for Western Hungary were departing.

It was dusk by the time they reached Fonyód, a small watering-place on the south-eastern shore of Lake Balaton. Half of the party left the train two miles up the line. Furka, Stephen and Eve were still together and found a hiding-place behind the small station, their rendezvous with the others. They waited for twenty minutes and then the others joined them.

“Have you found out where this place is?” asked Stephen, his voice a little uneven in his otherwise well-disguised excitement. If chance did not rob him again of his prize, he would be settling accounts with Schwarzwolf before long.

Katona nodded.

“About a mile uphill,” he said. “But we’d better wait until it’s quite dark.”

“You wait,” Stephen said. “Or rather, I would like you to come along with me if you know where the place is. I’d like to scout around. Could you explain to Furka exactly where he has to lead the others? They could follow in about an hour.”

“No, I won’t have you go off on your own,” protested Paddy. “We must all share the fun.”

“Don’t be silly, Paddy. This is far too serious. We must spy out the land. Schwarzwolf is too canny a bird to be trapped easily. If anything should happen to Katona and me

you could still carry on. No, you stay here and give us half an hour's start."

There was no more opposition from the others. Katona gave Furka detailed instructions in hurried, low-pitched Magyar. Then he and Stephen slipped across the muddy street.

The little watering-place was dead and deserted. In a few months, with the coming of summer, its streets would be thronged with holiday-makers, its restaurants and cafés in full swing, its beaches crowded with bodies in various stages of sunburn—but now everything was dark and silent. Katona explained in a low voice that Fonyód was the only place along the south-eastern shore of Lake Balaton which could boast of a hill and a small wood—all the other places were flat and devoid of trees except those planted by the managements of the various bathing resorts. They began to climb now though the slope was not too steep. Houses emerged dimly from the dusk on both sides of the road which was lined by poplars. Darkness was gathering rapidly. Most of the villas were shuttered, rank winter grass covered the front gardens, and they did not see a single human being. The road was now steeper and Katona was breathing heavily, but Stephen did not stop. At last they had breasted the top of the hill, and he paused at the touch of the Hungarian's hand on his arm.

"We must be quite close now," he whispered. "It's on the right, surrounded by some acacia trees. The outermost ditch is the deepest. Perhaps I'd better go ahead. . . ."

"No, we must stick together," replied Barrett.

Guided by Katona, he turned to the right. Side by side they began to descend into what appeared a fairly deep gully. There was a lot of tangled undergrowth and they had to move slowly. Then they were at the bottom though they could see little. In front of them there was another rising slope and they started to climb it. On the top they found a narrow path which curved both to left and right. Once more they descended and once more they had to climb. Then, dimly in the rapidly failing light, they saw a considerable circular clearing in front of them with a small, obviously artificial hillock rising in its middle.

"The innermost stronghold of the Avars," breathed Stephen to his companion, who nodded.

There was no sound, no sign of any human being. Was it possible that Lieven's last message would prove a hoax, that all his brainwork had been in vain? There was nothing to show that within a few yards the Holy Crown of Hungary was hidden . . . that somewhere in or behind that grassy hillock his old enemy was waiting. Stephen felt deeply worried at the idea that this might be a wild-goose chase . . . and that the crown might be beyond the Hungarian frontiers. But he told himself that his "hunches" had seldom played him false, and that Katona's reasoning about the causes which would keep Schwarzwolf on the scene of operations couldn't be but sound.

And now a slight, hardly perceptible noise came from the flat clearing in front of them. It was little more than a whisper or rustle—but Stephen grasped Katona's arm. Slowly, with infinite caution, an oblong part of the clearing turned to a deeper blackness than the night. And Stephen understood . . . there was a trap-door or some opening of which the covering had been removed. For a few seconds nothing happened . . . then a head appeared, a white blob in the centre of the blackness. It was followed by the full figure of a man who emerged from the depths of the earth. Again the slight noise and the grass seemed to be unbroken. The man stood for a moment, poised motionless, and then hurried off towards the central hillock. He skirted it, however, and vanished behind it.

"Come on!" whispered Barrett, and they both started to crawl down the slope towards the hillock. It was an uncomfortable journey though a silent one; and when they reached the spot where the man had popped up from the ground, there was no trace of a trap-door or any similar arrangement. It seemed to be hopeless to search for it in the darkness; nor was it certain that it could be opened from the outside. So Stephen continued his cautious progress right up to the hillock. He turned to the left as the man they had observed had done. The grassy clearing extended to the other side. Barrett stopped. Somewhere . . . inside the hillock . . . a dull, steady throbbing and thudding was going on. He rose and

pressed his whole body against the rough side of the slope while his arms and hands felt the surface of withered grass. Katona kept close to him, and it was he who nudged Stephen, signalling that he had discovered something. The Englishman edged closer. Yes, Katona had stumbled on a clue . . . the grass was thinner here, the layer of earth underneath only an inch or so and below it . . . something hard, concrete or metal. They began to dig with their fingers, and after a few minutes their hands encountered a cold and firm surface. They tugged at it, but it would not move. Then Stephen's foot slipped, something yielded, and they were both precipitated into a dark cavity which sloped steeply downwards. It was like a narrow chute, with perfectly smooth sides, and there was no way of stopping their rapid descent. Stephen heard Katona grunt when his elbow struck the Hungarian . . . and then his feet touched a horizontal surface once more. It was pitch dark around them. He found Katona's arm and pressed it to keep him silent. They began to grope forward. The wall they touched was smooth and damp. A few yards brought them to an opening. At the far end of what must have been a tunnel or shaft a faint glimmer of light seemed to beckon to them. They made for it, stepping slowly and cautiously as it was both distant and dim. The tunnel must have been long, for the light increased only gradually in strength. Then there was another sharp turn and they stood on the threshold of a spacious underground chamber. Stephen had no eyes for anything except the solitary figure seated in front of an oil stove.

"Your time's up, Schwarzwolf," said Stephen. His eyes were narrowed, his voice cold and level. The hand which held the gun was steady like an iron rod. "You had a long run . . . but it's all over now. This time you've been too foolhardy . . . you've lost. Remember Szeged? I am quoting you. It's unpleasant, isn't it, when your words come roosting home? "

The Gestapo man did not move. Katona was standing close behind him with another gun. Only the scar had become livid on his long, narrow face; otherwise he stood perfectly still. He was in shirt-sleeves, his black S.S. jacket with the swastika

armlet thrown across the back of a chair.

"I have no time for gloating," Stephen continued. "Though I am sorely tempted. We are in a hurry—hand over the crown and I'll give you a fifty-fifty chance to live."

Schwarzwolf remained silent. His face twitched and his hands clenched, but he did not speak.

"Come on, Schwarzwolf," Barrett urged him. "You used to be a fairly intelligent chap though you're losing your grip. You don't want me to become melodramatic. I could search this place and tear it to pieces—but why waste time?"

And now the Gestapo man laughed. It was a harsh and nasty sound—more of a croak than genuine laughter. He lifted his head and stared at Stephen insolently.

"You fool!" he said softly and without rancour. "You thrice cursed fool! Do you think it's all so simple? I don't know how you found me—someone must have blundered and I'll see that he pays for it—but do you imagine that I'd give up my prize so easily?"

"Not easily, Schwarzwolf," Stephen replied. "But you'll give it up all right. Quit sparring. . . . I told you I didn't want to waste time."

There was a malicious glint of triumph in the Gestapo man's eyes.

"You've found this place," he began. "I hardly thought anybody would—for we had prepared it well enough to keep it hidden from the Hungarian authorities for the last five years. But do you think that we hadn't provided for any eventuality?"

"Don't ask me," snapped Stephen. "Just go on with the fairy story."

"It isn't a fairy story. The whole place is mined. I only need to touch a button to send it sky-high."

"*Very* convenient. Only you won't have a chance to touch any buttons."

"You *are* dense," Schwarzwolf shook his head. "The crown is here . . . in this room. We have a very special safe built for our confidential documents. If anyone tried to open it without knowing the combination, the contents of the safe would be destroyed. High-voltage electricity can melt metal

. . . and your precious crown would be little more than a mass of twisted bits and pieces. . . . No one knows the combination except I and . . .”

He stopped dead.

“And?” prompted Stephen. His voice was suave, almost purring.

“No one else,” fenced Schwarzwolf. “I am the only one.”

“Look, you rat,” Stephen said calmly. “I would hate to spoil your attractive face . . . but if you don’t produce the crown within five minutes, I’ll start a little target practice. And don’t try any monkey tricks. I know you like life just as much as anybody else and don’t believe that you’d try to do the noble hero act—blow up yourself with us. Still, I am willing to take that risk. Get going.”

“I haven’t the slightest intention of falling in with your wishes,” the German said. “If you can find the crown, find it. If not, I won’t lift a finger to help you. Why should I?”

Stephen turned away.

“Katona,” he said, “will you please keep an eye on our friend? Don’t hesitate to shoot if he tries any funny business. I’d suggest his stomach as the most natural target. I am going outside.”

He picked up a torch he found lying on a table and walked into the tunnel which had led him and his companion to Schwarzwolf’s underground den. He picked out in the torchlight a staircase which branched off to the left, and guessed that this must lead to an exit less difficult to manage than the chute down which he had rolled with Katona. He ran up the stairs until he came to a trap-door. It was worked by an intricate mechanism and it took him a few minutes to master it. When he raised it he found himself on the identical spot where the mysterious figure had emerged only such a short time ago. Stephen confessed to himself that he remembered that figure only now . . . yet he might be a source of potential danger. He replaced the trap-door and marvelled again at the perfect camouflage; even from the distance of a few yards it was impossible to distinguish it from the surrounding sparse grass.

His plan was to run down to the rest of the party. He felt

that he needed some help to handle Schwarzwolf—also, if they were more numerous, the German would see it sooner how hopeless his resistance was. Stephen suspected that part of his bravado was bluff, though he had plenty of personal courage. It might or might not be true that he could destroy the crown and blow the whole queer hiding-place sky-high—but the stake was too big to run any risk. . . .

He had covered only a few steps when he stopped in his tracks. Someone was moving behind him; someone he could not see. He turned sharply and flashed his torch. It was immediately followed by another flash—a gun barked and the bullet sang above his head. But the brief moment of light had revealed a figure standing near the spot of the trap-door. Stephen dropped to his knees and began to stalk the man. The gun flashed once more—but its report was not loud; it must have been equipped with a silencer. Then he saw a dark shape, a little more solid than the night, and he lunged forward. The next moment he was at grips with his invisible opponent. He felt a slim, almost childish body, and it took him little time to beat down its opposition. The man went limp under his hands. Stephen felt for and removed his gun. He rose and lifted the inert body on his shoulder. It was light, more like a boy's. He hesitated for a moment, but before he could decide in which direction to turn, he heard soft whistling from the dark. Someone was whistling the melody of the old *kuruc* song, the march of the Ragged Guard:

*" O Magyar, think no German true,
No matter how he flatter you . . . "*

" Furka? " asked Stephen, and heard the affirmative grunt of the giant masseur.

Figures loomed up from the darkness and he flashed his torch to show where he was. They crowded around him, but before any of them could speak, Stephen asked in German:

" Who is that with you? "

A deep voice answered:

" Ferenc . . . or Franz . . . at your service, sir."

So the "thug" who had helped him to escape from the Szeged German Consulate had turned up! Stephen felt that

this was a most fortunate coincidence. Apparently Franz—or Ferenc, to give his Christian name its Hungarian form—was a most astute fellow . . . for he must have faced an unpleasant quandary after he, Stephen, got away from Schwarzwolf's clutches.

In a few hurried words he described the situation.

"Do you . . . do you think that Schwarzwolf could really destroy the crown?" asked Count Martin anxiously.

"I don't know," answered Barrett. "But we must prevent him—and get the crown. Perhaps . . . perhaps Franz can help us. But come on now . . . I don't trust Schwarzwolf to behave himself with only one man to guard him. . . ."

But when they regained the underground room they found Katona sitting in an armchair while Schwarzwolf faced him with a set, white face. His left arm was hanging down, strangely twisted.

"He tried to attack me," explained the Hungarian. "I had to shoot him—through the arm. I bandaged it up, though," he added with a certain regret for the necessity in his voice.

Stephen replaced his unconscious burden on a bench. It was only now that he saw his prisoner was a young man with fair hair and a gentle, immature face, dressed in the uniform of the S.S. Schwarzwolf was staring at him with something like panic in his eyes.

Eve found some water and began to massage the young man's hands. He opened his eyes, looked around in confusion and then . . . burst into tears.

"What is this . . . a fancy-dress ball?" sneered Schwarzwolf. At the sound of his voice the fair-haired boy clapped his hands to his eyes and stifled his sobs.

"No," answered Count Martin before Stephen could speak. "It is the only dress in which I and my friends could travel through our own country. Our *own*, Schwarzwolf, which you and your filthy friends want to turn into a Nazi Protectorate."

"Want to?" replied the German. "We *have* turned it into a Protectorate. . . . What else do you think your stupid Magyars are good for? To serve us, Germans . . . obediently.

If we offered you a bribe or two, it was only the quickest way. The iron hand in the velvet glove. But soon the glove will be off! "

Count Martin turned away. Stephen spoke now:

"Have you thought it over, Schwarzwolf? "

"Yes. And I'll see you damned first before I help you! "

"I see. Well, then . . . perhaps your young friend will help us. Surely he knows? "

The fair-haired boy raised his head and stared, bewildered, first at Schwarzwolf and then at Stephen.

"He . . . he doesn't know anything," the German growled. "He's just a silly boy whom I . . . I had to shelter for a few days. I wouldn't dream of confiding in him."

But now the voice of Franz cut through the sudden silence. He had been standing in the background and Schwarzwolf had not noticed him until now.

"You are lying! This boy is . . ."

"Don't! " Schwarzwolf's voice rose in a sharp scream. "You mustn't! You are a German, Franz Beyer . . . it is your duty . . ."

The big, square-shouldered man stepped forward.

"My duty? I may be a German, but I am not your kind, Herr Schwarzwolf. Your kind killed my brother in thirty-three. He had nothing to do with politics—but one of your filthy S.A. men wanted his good job. And so he was made an 'enemy of the state'. . . . You killed him by instalments . . . for eighteen months he died inch by inch in Dachau! I served you long enough . . . waiting for my revenge. It has come now . . . oh, how beautifully it has come! "

His voice broke. Then he shouted hoarsely:

"That boy . . . he's his nephew . . . he had brought him to Hungary to live with him now that the Germans plan to take over the country. He'd do anything to spare him . . . I know he would! "

Stephen took Eve's hand and pulled her to her feet. Then he propelled her gently into the tunnel.

"Go outside, my dear," he said. "This is not for you."

He found that Count Martin had joined them. The two young people vanished in the darkness.

Stephen returned to the underground chamber. He stopped close to the bench and faced the Gestapo man.

"Well, Schwarzwolf? You know two things, I think. First that I'd hate to cause pain to this young man. Second that I would do it without the slightest hesitation if I saw no other way. This is an unclean fight . . . but you began it . . . eight years ago. What is your answer? "

Months later Stephen, not given to dissecting the past and analysing his mistakes or successes, recalled that scene in the strange hide-out, underneath the old Avar hill. What would have happened, he wondered, if Franz had not turned up, guided by the scattered outposts of the Ragged Guard, to join the rescuers of the crown? What would have happened if he had not caught Schwarzwolf's nephew, the only weak link in the Gestapo man's armour? Not that in the end it made much difference—he *felt* that he would have found ways and means to make Schwarzwolf give up the crown. But as it happened it was the co-operation of luck and daring which gave them success.

The German tried everything from threats to the offer of bribes. One moment he was humble, the other he burst into a flood of obscenity. It was a weird and unreal scene there, a hundred feet below ground, bargaining and bluffing, fighting and calculating chances. But in the end Schwarzwolf gave in. The boy had not spoken a single word during the whole time. But he was young and afraid of pain. Stephen discovered later that he was the only son of Schwarzwolf's sister who died in child-birth. His uncle had turned him into a good little Nazi—but he could not make him into a hero. The boy was terribly afraid of physical pain. There was nothing more effective than even a threat of that . . . nothing, that is to say, which could have moved Schwarzwolf more readily to acquiescence.

For in the end he gave in. Closely guarded by Furka and Katona, he took them to a small alcove and there opened a safe. It was a fitting testimonial to his warped sense of humour that the combination he had chosen was the word: "*Ungarschwein*"—Hungarian swine. With slightly trembling

hands he reached into the dark cavity and brought out a bulky parcel wrapped in oilcloth. He thrust it into Stephen's hand and turned away.

Paddy was guarding the young boy. Furka and Katona kept at Schwarzwolf's side. Stephen was left alone with the parcel. For a moment he thought of opening it—then he changed his mind. This ancient piece of jewellery meant little or nothing to him except as a counter in the desperate game he was playing. But it meant a great deal to the Hungarians. He had noticed the awe on Katona's face and his instinctive reluctance in moving away from the alcove. Furka's impassive features, too, seemed to twitch with some hidden emotion. This was their Holy Crown, symbol of their independence and national past—a hallowed object which the modern pirates tried to defile. . . . Stephen knew little of Magyar ceremonial, but he imagined that elaborate rituals would be necessary to restore the crown's sanctity—just like the Roman Catholic Church insists on re-consecrating its holy places after sacrilege or pagan contact.

He stepped into the tunnel and called Count Martin. The young man was long in coming, and when he returned his arm had slipped round Eve's shoulders. He stiffened when he saw the oilcloth parcel in Barrett's hand.

"He . . . he . . ."

Stephen nodded. "Yes, he gave in. I thought I'd give you this . . . you have more right to take charge of it than I. . . ."

The young aristocrat accepted the parcel reverently. He advanced a few steps until he was standing directly beneath the powerful naked bulb in the arched ceiling. Then, with a swift, nervous movement he unwrapped the oilcloth.

The crown looked very old and frail. Its amethysts and sapphires, rubies and pearls, its gold and garnets, caught the light with a hundred facets and threw it back with a proud dazzle. The cross on its top was leaning to the left—legend had it that the angel who brought the crown to St. Stephen dropped it . . . though the truth was probably far more prosaic even if lost in the dim distance of history.

Stephen glanced at Eve's bent head, Count Martin's serious

young face. Then he tiptoed into the darkness of the tunnel. He felt that he had to leave those two alone with the crown.

"We want to leave you in comfort, Schwarzwolf," Stephen said. The German gave him a dark look but remained silent. "No sense in tying you up. God knows why we don't kill you . . . but somehow I feel that you'll save us the trouble. In any case, I am going to take your nephew for a nice long ride. We'll let him go when we've finished our job . . . and no doubt he'll fly back to you. . . ."

The boy followed them without protest. His large blue eyes were fastened on his uncle, but he did not speak. Schwarzwolf opened his lips, changed his mind and contented himself with one of his glowering looks. He looked so grim that he was almost comic, and yet there was some undeniable dignity in him.

Katona was at Stephen's elbow.

"Hadn't we better tie him up . . . so that he could get loose in an hour or so?"

"No, I have a better plan," answered Barrett. He asked Furka to join him. Together they checked on the exits of this peculiar rabbits' warren. They found only two—the trap-door and the other through which Stephen and Katona had entered. It was the work of only a few minutes to destroy the mechanisms so that the doors could not be opened from inside.

"Good-bye, Schwarzwolf," said Stephen when they were all assembled in the central chamber. Eve had in the meantime removed her old crone disguise. Schwarzwolf's nephew was staring at her in evident, though unwilling admiration.

"*Au revoir*—in hell," answered the Gestapo man.

The party of adventurers, with Franz and the German boy, emerged from the trap-door. It was almost dawn and the air very cold. The road leading down to the lake was dark and deserted again. But they had gone only a few hundred yards when a tremendous explosion shook the earth beneath them. Eve stumbled and would have fallen if Count Martin had not caught her. Their eyes were blinded by a dazzling column of fire rising from the centre of the Avar encampment. The boy

whimpered like a frightened puppy. Then the column slowly subsided, leaving a steady, red glow which lit up the sky angrily.

"Schwarzwolf . . . ?" Eve whispered.

Stephen nodded.

Then they walked on, silently. Count Martin hugged the parcel in oilcloth like a newborn baby. But there was no exultation in their hearts. Death, even that of a wicked man, is always awesome in its finality. And Schwarzwolf proved a better man in his death than he had ever been in his life.

From that moment on the lonely hillside road everything seemed to go wrong. Though the most important part of their task had been successful, they still faced many miles of danger and hostility—for they had to get the crown to Budapest, escape arrest and approach the Premier without being detected. The car which Katona had arranged to pick them up half a mile beyond Fonyód did not keep the rendezvous. Their party was too large to remain together and so they split again in two groups. The trip to the capital was long and full of tension. Once or twice they were on the brink of disaster; but in the end they met—late at night before the third day of April—in a small Buda restaurant kept by one of the supporters of the Ragged Guard.

All the members of the party were there, tired, footsore and strangely nervous. It was decided that Stephen and Count Martin should take the crown to the Premier's private flat in the Joseph Square where the man with the tired face lived in puritan simplicity. The others were to make arrangements for escape—it was quite evident that even after delivering the crown they could not stay in Hungary, where the Gestapo was still hunting, and every man's hand was against them.

The neat square, close to the famous Corso, was deserted except for a lonely policeman on night duty. There was a small park in the centre of the square and Stephen found a convenient bench set among some bushes. There he agreed to wait until Count Martin should spy out the lie of the land.

The young aristocrat stayed away for a long time—so long that Stephen began to feel alarmed. He was just debating

with himself whether to go after him or not when he heard steps . . . slow and dragging . . . on the gravel path of the park. The next moment Count Martin had sat down heavily on the bench beside him. Stephen could not see his face, but he heard his heavy, laboured breathing.

"What is it?" he asked after a while, gently.

Something like a sob shook the young man's body.

"The Premier . . . is . . . dead. . . ."

"What?"

"We were too late. Five hours ago the Germans presented an ultimatum. The Prime Minister called a Cabinet meeting—and found that most of his fellow-ministers were against him. Bardossy, that rat, had worked on them until they were all prepared to give in. The Premier put the matter to the vote—and was defeated. He left them, went home and shot himself. . . ."

"But that means . . ."

Count Martin nodded.

"Hungary is marching against Yugoslavia. Five months ago we vowed eternal friendship to the Serbs. We fought them in the last war . . . but how many wars have we fought together against Turk and Tartar! Eternal friendship . . . and then this. I . . . I am ashamed to be a Hungarian. . . ."

He was silent and Stephen did not care to disturb this mute misery. But in the end he risked the question:

"And the crown?"

"I left it with Count Geza . . . *his* son. It's too precious to share whatever adventures and humiliations must follow for me. He . . . he promised to take care of it . . . to hand it to people worthy of the high trust. . . . And now . . ."

He was silent again.

"Count Martin . . ." Stephen began softly, "causes are lost and won . . . but the fight goes on for ever. And you are not alone. . . ."

The young man lifted his head. His voice was still unsteady but no longer hopeless when he repeated:

"No . . . I am not alone. . . ."

THE RAGGED GUARD

PART TWO

DR. MILAN PETROVITCH was asleep. He looked as if sleep had overtaken him suddenly, against his will; like an assassin stabbing an unsuspecting victim in the back. His head had fallen forward on the laboratory table, cluttered with test-tubes, a Bunsen lamp, glass slides, notebooks and a hundred other odds and ends. His face rested on his hands and was hidden. His thick grey hair was long and untidy; it was a considerable time since he had visited a barber—if a barber was left plying his trade in the city of Belgrade.

The laboratory was an underground room, practically the only one which had escaped damage in the bombardment. Above it the wards were windowless, some of them roofless. And yet this skeleton hospital, this rubble-littered, gaping shell was crowded with beds and each bed was occupied. Almost two months had passed since the "chivalrous Luftwaffe" had rained hell upon the open city of Belgrade. No one had been able to add up the toll of death; for all over the city hundreds, perhaps thousands, were still buried underneath the ruins. And then, when the funeral processions had started towards the cemeteries, the bombers returned. The dead and the living were mixed in a horrible mess of seared flesh, torn bones and gushing blood. Mourners became mourned; whole families were wiped out, and the terror from the skies still did not abate.

When it had ended and the Luftwaffe had turned back with another of its "glorious victories" to add to the score of Rotterdam, Warsaw, Coventry and Louvain, Dr. Petrovitch and his colleagues crept from the few inadequate air-raid shelters. They recruited stretcher parties; they pressed into nursing service girls who would have previously fainted at the sight of blood. Now they did not faint. They tried to bury the dead, but it was a task beyond their strength. Then, at least, they attempted to rescue the living, to give medical care to the thousands of wounded, maimed—most of them dying, few of them capable of being saved.

Almost two months—and they were still labouring at their ghastly task. Less than a week after the Stukas had amused themselves by machine-gunning the funeral processions, General von Kleist's tanks had rolled into Belgrade, finding that some S.S. troops were already in occupation.

It was the Military Governor who, with a large *entourage*, swaggered into the hall of the bombed hospital, kicking at the pieces of plaster which were still strewn around the floor. The last attack had taken place only two days previously, but His Excellency made a grimace of contempt while he strutted up and down in front of the doctors and nurses drawn up in a ragged line.

"Who is the head of this hospital?" he bellowed.

The men and women in the bewildered group exchanged quick glances. Professor Gredec, the eminent surgeon who had been in charge, was killed with his wife and three daughters on the day of the first raid. Most of the younger doctors were with the Army. At last Dr. Petrovitch, head of the laboratory, stepped forward.

"Name?" roared the Governor, who seemed to be unable to speak in a normal voice.

"Dr. Milan Petrovitch," muttered the tired man with the iron-grey hair.

"What? I can't hear you. Speak up, man!"

The doctor repeated his name.

"Petrovitch?" The Governor turned to an aide-de-camp. "Make a note of it. You'll be responsible for this place and all its inmates. Seventy-five per cent of the medical stores to be handed over to our quartermaster. Bandages, too. . . ."

"But, Your Excellency . . ." protested Dr. Petrovitch, "we haven't enough even for our own needs! The hospital is overcrowded . . . we have more than two thousand patients and . . ."

"Silence!" the rasping voice cut him short. "You ought to be grateful that I leave you one quarter of your supplies. It is just as well that you learn early who is master in this swineherd city! Of course you'll be under the supervision of a German doctor. He'll take over to-night. No patient to be admitted without his permission. And have the medical

supplies ready by to-morrow morning. If I catch anyone at the slightest attempt of obstruction or sabotage he or she will be shot. *Abtreten!*"

In the few hours left to them, doctors and nurses worked frantically to hide as much of their precious instruments and drugs as they could without awakening suspicion. It was not much, but just before the German Army surgeon arrived, a small, wizened man slipped into the hospital's kitchen. He asked for Dr. Petrovitch, and Militza, the matron, noticed the urgency in his voice. She took him straight to the laboratory where the new chief of the hospital was engaged in prying off some of the floor-boards to cover up the valuable hoard.

"Dr. Petrovitch?" the little man asked. "I am Dushan Ribnik. Don't you remember? Mine used to be the big chemist's shop opposite the *Dvor*."

"Ribnik? Ribnik?" repeated the doctor. "Oh, yes, of course I know you, Gospodin Ribnik. But . . . what happened to you? You . . ."

The small man nodded with a bitter smile.

"I have aged, haven't I, *gospodin* doctor? So would you—so would anyone. . . . My wife is dead . . . and my daughter-in-law . . . with the three little ones. My house is in ruins and my shop too."

"That is terribly sad, Gospodin Ribnik. If there is anything I can do . . ."

The little man grasped the doctor's arm.

"There's a good deal you can do," he whispered. "My shop . . . it was completely destroyed. But I got into the basement where my store-rooms used to be. They are untouched . . . with all the drugs and instruments. You must get them . . . now . . . before they start a search. That's what they are after, more than anything—for their own wounded. If you could come along . . ."

"And you? Wouldn't you care to stay here in the hospital? You must rest . . . you might be able to help us. . . ."

Ribnik shook his head.

"No, Gospodin Petrovitch. I cannot rest. I am off

to-night—to the mountains. I am not much of a man, but I can still hold a rifle or throw a bomb. . . . Here . . . I couldn't stay in Belgrade where she . . ."

His voice broke and he hid his face while sobs shook his thin body. Dr. Petrovitch patted his shoulder awkwardly. That night some of the internes and nurses defied the curfew immediately enforced by the Nazis. They were almost caught but managed to get a lorry load of invaluable stuff into the hospital—right under the nose of their new Nazi master, Dr. Holzhausen, who had arrived just after Dushan Ribnik had slipped away—just as noiselessly and unobtrusively as he had come.

Dr. Holzhausen was a genuine Prussian, modelled on the caricatures which the German comic papers used to print before even their cartoonists lost their sense of humour. He was tall with the scars of student duels on his swarthy face, a monocle in one eye and a complete absence of inhibitions. He had—though it took Dr. Petrovitch some time to find out the fact—started his career as a vet, and only the fact that he was a good Nazi enabled him to transfer his activities to human patients. He was nobody's fool, but his own best friend. After he had visited all the wards and made insulting remarks about "Serbian dirt and incompetence", he requisitioned for himself the only comfortable room on the first floor, made the nurses evacuate three patients *in extremis*, installed himself with a bottle of *sligovicz* and "retired from circulation". Not without, however, impressing upon Dr. Petrovitch the dire consequences of holding back any medical supplies above the twenty-five per cent permitted for the hospital's use. . . .

Almost two months had passed since that April day. Eight weeks of superhuman effort. Doctors and nurses called themselves lucky if they snatched five hours' sleep a day—and often it was less. Most of the other hospitals in the city had been completely destroyed, and the Germans would not admit Yugoslavs into their own military *Krankenhäuser*. Patients were lying in the corridors, the courtyards and the garden; some of them under an improvised awning on the flat roof. They died by the hundred; for not even ten times the drugs and instruments Dr. Petrovitch and his staff had secreted

would have been sufficient. Only a trickle of replacements was permitted by the Germans, and Dr. Holzhagen explained that a "sharply declining birth-rate" would be most beneficial for the future of Yugoslavia. That an increasing death-rate would be even better, he did not think necessary to add. . . .

Dr. Petrovitch stirred. Someone was tapping and scraping on the door which opened into the underground passage. It took a few minutes before he became aware of it, and when he raised his head he was still drugged with sleep. Almost unconscious, he dragged himself to the door and opened it.

It was dark in the passage and he sensed rather than saw the two men carrying some load between them. He could not make out their faces; only the gleam of a button, the glint of the whites of their eyes.

"Here, *gospodin* doctor," one of them whispered hoarsely. "We cannot do more. Perhaps you can save him. He is a good boy."

They bent down and placed with infinite care a slight, young body at Petrovitch's feet. The boy was wrapped in a sheepskin coat, and now that the light fell on him, the doctor saw his flushed, feverish face. The men straightened.

"But what . . ." the doctor began. But before he could finish the sentence, the men stepped back and one of them had closed the door. Petrovitch wrenched it open—only to see them turn the corner of the passage and vanish in the darkness.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the boy. He lifted him in his arms—the wasted, pitiful body was not a heavy burden. He placed him on the large table in the centre of the laboratory. The boy, little more than a child, was unconscious, breathing heavily, his smooth face puckered in pain.

Now, while the doctor was gently, skilfully unfolding the large sheepskin coat, the boy began to mutter as if in delirium:

"The bridge . . . they are coming . . . quick, Pavel . . . the fuse. . . . Pa . . . avel . . . Pa . . . avel . . . I . . . I am going back. . . . I am . . ."

The rest was lost in a broken whisper. Dr. Petrovitch's lips

narrowed to a grim, thin line. The boy's left leg was wrapped in a make-shift bandage through which blood was still seeping. No, he did not dare to touch it. He . . . he must probably operate . . . at once. . . .

He hurried to the smaller table on which he had had his short rest. His fingers slid under the top until they found a button which he pressed three times. Then he lifted the receiver of the hospital telephone and waited.

"Militza?" he asked after a short wait. The three buzzes meant that the matron was not to speak if any German was about. "I . . . I just had in another of them . . . no, two men brought him . . . we must operate at once . . . clear a bed in Ward S. . . . Yes, send down two of the internes to help me . . . hurry . . . hurry. . . ."

He wiped his forehead when he returned to the unconscious boy who was stirring again, his lips forming words, half of them inaudible.

"I . . . I must get back . . . they . . . they told me . . . the bridge . . . it must go up . . . then the Ragged Guard can come . . . the Rag . . ."

He screamed, one short, sharp sound, shattering the silence of the laboratory. Dr. Petrovitch rushed to the corner where a small wireless set was placed on the top of a cupboard. He turned it on full volume and soon the guttural, unctuous voice of the German announcer filled the room.

". . . for the Fuehrer's patience is not endless. We warn the Serbians for the last time that the repeated attempts at sabotage must lead to the most severe reprisals. For every German soldier killed a hundred Serbian hostages will be shot. It is time the stubborn and short-sighted Serbs realized that they have been vanquished and that unquestioning collaboration is the only policy which can save them from extermination. The so-called patriots, scattered bands of ragged bandits, can have no hope . . ."

How generous of the Nazis to permit the conquered people to listen to their propaganda! The wireless set would not "bring in" other stations except those under German control; on the other hand, His Excellency the Governor and Dr. Holzhagen had no idea of the powerful receiving set which

one of Dr. Petrovitch's assistants had built and which the hospital staff had hidden in . . . the morgue.

The boy did not speak again and the doctor switched off the radio. The two internes appeared with a stretcher and the boy was transferred to it with the greatest care. They covered him completely with a sheet. At the doctor's nod one of the young assistants took the sheepskin coat and removed it from sight. Then the stretcher began its slow journey towards the operating room.

The boy's leg had been shattered by some explosive; the only way to save him from gangrene and a quick death was to amputate it. Even so it was touch and go, and Dr. Petrovitch was doubtful whether there might not be some internal injuries. He worked swiftly but surely. Any moment Dr. Holzhagen might turn up, and though a line of watchers was posted all over the building, very little time would be left for concealment. And though Dr. Holzhagen was a very bad doctor, he was not a fool. He knew that no one with a leg injury had been admitted to the hospital for the past week; and he also knew what the penalties were for anybody helping a *chetnik*, wounded or in distress. There could not be the slightest doubt that this young boy had been mixed up in some sabotage attempt and got hurt while trying to blow up a bridge. Dr. Petrovitch and his assistants knew perfectly well that the least they could expect for their Samaritan work would be a concentration camp or deportation to the mines; more probably it would be death. But there was not the tiniest tremor in the hand holding the scalpel; the two nurses handling the instruments moved with well-trained precision and the anæsthetist was completely absorbed in his special task. Dr. Petrovitch finished his work unhurriedly, trying to create a clean stump, sewing up the arteries, putting in the clamps. Then the rest of the bandages . . . and the boy was wheeled from the operating theatre.

"I am going to take a shower, Misha," the doctor told a young man with very dark hair and eyebrows. "Will you go to Ward S and keep an eye on him? I am not quite happy about his pulse. . . ."

Only when he slipped from his clothes and was rubbing himself down with a towel, did he realize that his whole body was bathed in sweat and that his legs were trembling. With a sudden gesture he lifted his fists and shook them . . . threatening those beyond the walls . . . those who were responsible for a boy's crippledom . . . whose mad aggression forced a youngster to handle implements of death when he should have been sitting in a schoolroom or dreaming of a girl's first kiss. It was a hopeless and weak threat . . . and then the water cascaded down in an icy stream and Dr. Petrovitch felt that it was not quite so hopeless and weak. . . .

Ward "S" was a narrow, long room in a wing of the hospital which had suffered most in the bombardment. It could be approached through a staircase which still showed large gaps. But there was another entrance of which the Germans did not know—not yet. Sooner or later they were bound to find out, but Dr. Petrovitch and his staff preferred not to think of that unavoidable day. An elevator shaft led from the boiler-room straight to Ward "S". The lift itself had been destroyed, but the young doctors fixed up a makeshift affair which creaked and groaned, yet worked.

Ward "S" was a remarkable one in many ways. No patient ever died in it and none recovered. That is, no one was discharged as healed and yet the morgue received no bodies from it. At least that was what the reports which Dr. Holzhausen checked carefully always said. In truth mortality was just as high in Ward "S" as anywhere else in the hospital—and with the inadequate supplies it was almost a miracle that it was not higher—but, on the other hand, a great many patients left it . . . secretly, but restored to tolerable health. Their places were taken by those patients whom Dr. Holzhausen would have sent without the slightest hesitation to the Belgrade Gestapo—the *chetniks*, the soldiers of the Yugoslav Army who were still resisting and growing in strength . . . the saboteurs, the hundred-and-one different active enemies of Nazi oppression. Men and women were together in this ward. They knew that their mere presence was a deadly danger for their doctors and nurses; and they suffered in

silence, even when pain was almost unbearable. They would have preferred to live for their country; but they were equally prepared to die for it with the least fuss and noise.

It is a terrible thing when a whole nation rises in fury on the battlefield to fight an infinitely stronger enemy unto death; but it is far more terrible and awe-inspiring when a whole defeated nation refuses to acknowledge defeat and keeps the fires of hate alight with the fuel of its own individual members. Ward "S" was just as much a battlefield as heroic Kossowo or those fearful mountains of Albania through which the beaten Serb Army had staggered to a glorious rebirth on Corfu. Those who had to die fought their last battle with lips pressed together, with bodies held rigidly under control. Those who had a chance for survival and recovery fought in the same grim silence. Here no doctor had need for his "bedside manner", no nurse for consoling lies or cooling hand.

Once Dr. Holzhagen had climbed the staircase to the ward. But on his way down he slipped and almost fell thirty feet to a concreted courtyard. After that he avoided the place, though he checked with especial care the reports about it.

"What? No change?" he shouted at Dr. Petrovitch. "Does no one ever die in that accursed place?"

"All of them are contagious cases," the Serbian doctor replied. "The incubation period is long . . . and we must separate them. . . ."

He knew that the deception could not be carried on very long, but every day won was a clear gain. The dead were removed late at night, the recovered patients "faded away" before dawn and new ones were brought up by the rickety lift from the boiler-room. And the army of Draza Michailovitch grew and Dr. Petrovitch's iron-grey hair slowly turned to white. . . .

Three days after the operation on the young boy Dr. Petrovitch went to Ward "S". He was careful to visit the ward at least once a day by the "official" entrance. Militza, the matron, was in personal charge here. He glanced at her charts and noticed one which was headed with a question mark instead of a name—though few patients here were entered under their own.

"Who is that?" he asked in a low voice.

"The boy," Militza answered. "We don't know his name yet. He has been unconscious most of the time. But he's getting better."

Dr. Petrovitch conscientiously made his rounds, but he left his most recent patient last. For almost a fortnight now no one else had entered Ward "S" and he wondered what that meant. Had the *chetniks* withdrawn deeper into the mountains? Did they have their own hospitals? And what about the silent, incessant fight which went on in the battered capital and its vicinity? And what was this . . . this Ragged Guard . . . of which the boy had spoken in his delirium?

He sat down on a low chair at the boy's bedside. The young face was a little less pinched, had a little more colour; but it was still the face of a very ill child, with its high cheek-bones and the tousled shock of black hair above it.

And now the boy opened his eyes. They were very dark, with large pupils and long lashes. He stared at the doctor seriously, silently.

"How do you feel?" Petrovitch asked.

"I am well, thank you," the boy replied. His voice was a clear treble, his accent that of a well-educated youngster.

"What's your name?"

The thin face clouded, a hint of suspicion dimmed the eyes.

"Mine is Milan Petrovitch," the old doctor said quickly.

"I am your doctor. Your friends brought you to me. We are all friends here."

The boy gave him a long, level glance, then he answered:

"I am Ante Dobor. My . . . my people were all killed. They lived in Uzice. . . . I was away at school in Valjevo when the devils came, that's how I escaped. We all left school. I tried to get back to Uzice, but it was no good. Then . . . I met some of the Ragged Guard . . ."

"Who are they?" the doctor interrupted. "I mean . . . what is the Ragged Guard?"

"Haven't you heard of them?" The boy was evidently astonished. "They . . . help Colonel Draza and his men. They are of all nationalities, creeds and professions—but most

of them are peasants. They fight like heroes, but nobody really knows who they are. That's why the Nazis find it so hard to catch them. . . ."

His voice weakened and Dr. Petrovitch bent over him.

"You shouldn't excite yourself," he said. "Tell me the rest to-morrow. . . ."

"No, no!" protested Ante Dobor. "I must tell you *now* . . . so that you can do something about it. I . . . I was sent with four others to blow up a bridge. The fuse went out. The German sentries were coming. One . . . one of us ran away. I went back. That's how . . . how I was wounded. . . ." For the first time he glanced at the small mound underneath the bedclothes which was the stump of his leg. He stretched out a hand to feel it, but drew back suddenly. "I . . . I don't know the rest. . . . I thought I had died. I was happy."

He lay back and closed his eyes. The old doctor thought that he was asleep. But suddenly the boy sat bolt upright and caught hold of his hand.

"You must help them!" he pleaded. "They need it terribly. . . ."

"Who?"

"Colonel Draza's men. They are at . . ." He stopped suddenly and glanced around to make sure that no one was listening. Even so, he lowered his voice until it was hardly more than a whisper. "They are . . . at least some of them . . . at Uzice. They have arms and soldiers. But they have no surgical instruments, no bandages, no drugs. Many of them die of small wounds. They have doctors, but even doctors cannot work without their implements. Oh . . . it was terrible to see. . . . Twice they tried to send a messenger to Belgrade, but both were killed on the way. We . . . we were all told to speak to a doctor or nurse or chemist if we ever got here. . . . If you haven't heard yet from anyone . . . please, help them . . . help at once . . . for every day . . . every hour counts. . . ."

In spite of his caution his voice rose in excitement. Dr. Petrovitch gently forced him to lie down.

But the boy's eyes still shone with an urgent pleading, with an almost angry insistence.

"You must do it," he whispered, "you must . . . you must. . . ."

"We will do it," the doctor replied softly. "If we had only known . . . Tell me . . ."

But Ante Dobor's eyes were closed. He had lost consciousness again.

"Tell me," asked Milan Petrovitch, "has any of you ever heard of the Ragged Guard? "

There were half a dozen people sitting in the darkness of the boiler-room; only a small oil-lamp threw an uncertain, flickering light on the centre of the concrete floor. Militza, the matron, three young internes and a pretty Slovene nurse—the nucleus of the group which was working in mortal danger to thwart the brutality of the usurper. They had all taken elaborate precautions to attend this midnight meeting; they all knew that even so they might be discovered by some prowling Gestapo man or the unpredictable Dr. Holzhagen.

One of the young internes—a tall, red-haired Croatian boy—was the first to speak:

"You hear a great many rumours about them . . . but it's difficult to know what the truth is. . . ."

"I was told they were all Russians," another young doctor ventured.

"They have done a lot of harm to the Germans . . . not only in Serbia . . . but all over the Balkans," added the third.

"They all go about in rags," the pretty Slovene nurse contributed.

But it was Militza, motherly, comfortable, placid Militza, who made the most useful and most startling remark:

"I know where some of them live . . . in Belgrade. . . ."

"You *know*?" There was a faint reproach in Dr. Petrovitch's voice. "And you never told me!"

"I . . . I haven't met them myself," the matron defended herself. "They are not people who encourage . . . what you may call intimacy. If they need you or want your help, they come to you . . . and they know how to pick their own members. But otherwise they are very reserved and suspicious

. . . for if the Nazis ever found out . . .”

There was no need for her to finish her sentence.

“But where . . . where can we reach them?” asked the old doctor.

“I think I can get a message to them,” smiled Militza.

“Then, if they are willing, you can go and see them . . . but not before.”

Dr. Petrovitch had told his friends the news Ante Dobor had brought about the plight of Colonel Michailovitch’s army in Uzice and the other mountain fortresses of the *chetnik* groups. They all agreed that they had to do their utmost to help them. But how? All of them were under strict surveillance, nobody could move without passes and permits; and the Military Governor had forbidden any doctor or nurse to leave Belgrade. That was the reason why Dr. Petrovitch had thought of the Ragged Guard and their help.

“All right,” he said now. “Send your messenger. Ask them to give me a place and time for meeting them. Tell them it’s terribly urgent. Tell them . . .”

“They’ll know,” Militza said simply. “They seem to know almost everything.”

She seemed to be unwilling to explain this sweeping statement, and Dr. Petrovitch contented himself with giving her a mildly reproving look. Having spent most of his life in the laboratory, he liked exactitude in speech and writing. But at the same time he was a Serb, and in this year of 1941 facts and figures had been swept away by the tide of Evil and the avalanche of Mass Murder.

Lady Luck decided to smile for a little while on Dr. Petrovitch and his friends. Dr. Holzhagen declared that his arduous duties had completely exhausted him and he needed a rest “away from this stinking town”. He received permission to spend a week in Budapest. The Military Governor found it impossible to get a substitute for this period; German doctors were far too busy with their own wounded. But the “native staff” had proved so meek and submissive that it was thought safe to relax the watchful supervision of Yugoslavia’s new “protectors”.

The same evening when Dr. Holzhagen left for the delights of Budapest, Dr. Petrovitch stole from the hospital. Even so, he risked a good deal in defying the strictly enforced curfew; but he knew Belgrade like his own hand, even if the merciless bombing had changed many a street and square. He was dressed in a peasant's cloak and had left all his papers at home.

His destination was one of the most squalid and desolate quarters of the city; a maze of narrow, mean streets lined with small houses, or rather hovels. Here the gipsies lived. Some of the streets were burnt down; not even the skeletons of these makeshift homes had remained standing. The acrid smell of smoke and ashes still filled the air, for in many places the fire was smouldering underneath the rubble.

There was nothing gay about the "Gay Gipsy", one of the nondescript dives of the gipsy quarter. It was a low, narrow-fronted house with peeling walls and rusty bars at the windows. A few steps led down from the street into a kind of semi-basement which was the tap-room.

Dr. Petrovitch descended the stairs and swung open the rickety door. The room was long and narrow with one or two oil-lamps giving a miserable illumination to a dozen unvarnished, gate-legged tables and the same number of benches. There was a sort of bar across one end of the room with a shelf behind it and one or two barrels of wine placed on old boxes.

"Good evening!" the doctor said and glanced around. No one returned his greeting, though there were six people lounging about. A tall, immensely broad fellow was standing behind the bar wearing a red shirt; brass rings dangled from the lobes of his brown ears. A strikingly beautiful gipsy girl was wiping some of the rough glasses, though she frequently paused to exchange a few words with another man, a thin, wiry fellow of middle stature who wore leather breeches and a rainbow-hued shirt with a red kerchief knotted around his neck. Three other men were sitting in the background, deep in a card-game which seemed to be endless.

Dr. Petrovitch sat down at one of the tables near the entrance and asked for wine. The girl brought him some in an earthenware jug and returned to her gossiping at the

bar. The guest, received with such scant hospitality, tasted the wine and found it surprisingly good. He sipped it slowly and then, as if feeling hot, took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He took rather longer over it than one would have expected; but nothing happened. Dr. Petrovitch felt disappointed; Militza had trimmed the edges of his linen handkerchief to make them ragged—and yet he got no response to the prearranged signal. Perhaps this was not the right place after all. He had not a great deal of time to spend away from the hospital; the later the hour the more stringent the curfew control became in the streets. He debated with himself whether he should wait a few minutes more or leave at once when the tall, broad man left the counter and sauntered over to him.

"So you are interested in our foal, *gospodin*?" he asked.

"Yes, if it has a white star on the forehead," the doctor answered, feeling extremely foolish in reciting this senseless rigmarole—but at the same time his heart leapt, for this, too, was part of the prearranged opening gambit.

"It has a star all right," the giant replied. "It shines even in the darkness. You'd better come to the stable and see it."

Dr. Petrovitch rose and followed his huge guide docilely. They passed through a door behind the bar and walked along a dark passage until they came into a dark barn-like space filled with the smell of straw and animals.

"Take hold of my coat," a voice said in front of him. "Keep to the middle . . . then you won't stumble over the stalls."

Somewhere nearby a cow gave a low moo and the doctor almost jumped. Horses stamped in the darkness.

"We don't need any light for our talk," the same voice said. "What do you want?"

"Help," answered Dr. Petrovitch simply.

"Who sent you to us?"

"No one . . . that is . . . Militza told me . . ."

"Militza is a brave woman," another voice said suddenly. It was the girl's voice, but it came from somewhere higher and the doctor guessed that she must be sitting or lying above his head, probably on one of the cross-beams of the stable.

"You have been working for the Germans, Dr. Petrovitch," a third person spoke. It was a man and the doctor could not make out from where his voice came. "Or at least working under them. How can we trust you?"

"I haven't been working *for* the Germans!" protested the old man. "I worked for Yugoslavia and her allies . . . for all the wounded and dying people who . . ."

"We know all about your Ward S," a fourth voice interposed. "It is a brave but also a dangerous thing you are doing there. It may imperil the rest of your legitimate patients if the Germans discover it. . . ."

"I disagree," argued Dr. Petrovitch. "Every day we have won this way, counts. We have discharged more than a hundred patients from Ward S in the last six weeks. Men who would have been killed by the Germans or sent to concentration camps if they had not found a refuge with us."

There was a little silence and Dr. Petrovitch felt suddenly cold in spite of the June heat outside and the close atmosphere of the stable. What if these people were his enemies? How could he ever get away? What if the Gestapo had discovered the sign and countersign of this mysterious Ragged Guard?

But the girl's voice spoke again. It was young and fresh—and yet it was wise and mature.

"What do you want us to do?"

The doctor launched into a brief, clear explanation. He spoke of Ante Dobor, his arrival and his survival, the desperate plight of Uzice and Colonel Michailovitch—of his willingness to collect at least part of the supplies so badly needed—of the pressing need to get these supplies into the mountains . . . and he finished with the words:

"I was told that you alone can do it. I am in your hands. From now on I share your fate—for we have the same aim. But that isn't important. Your help is. Will you tell me . . ."

"We'll do it!" a man's voice answered. "Can you get the supplies out of the hospital?"

"Impossible. There are guards at the gate . . . we have a way out for ourselves, but we couldn't move bulky cases through that narrow passage. . . . We could get them into the courtyard, though."

"All right," the disembodied voice answered. "You have the stuff ready by to-morrow midnight and we will call for it."

"But how . . ."

"Never mind. You give the supplies to the man who has the right password about the foal. Leave the rest to us. . . ."

Dr. Petrovitch felt a hand grasping his arm and propelling him forward in the darkness. He almost tripped over a milking-stool—but the next minute he was standing under the starry sky while behind him a door clicked. He was in a farmyard and a gate gleamed whitely in front of him. He started to walk towards it, impressed and awed by the talk he had just had. For he could never swear that the people he talked to in the stable were the ones he had seen in the tap-room of the "Gay Gipsy". . . .

"Weren't you a little rash, Stephen? "

"Rash? When? Can you name any particular instance? I find it rather difficult to recall any time when I haven't been rash."

"Oh, you are hopeless! I mean just now, promising the old doctor that we would get his stuff away to Uzice."

"It seemed the only thing to say."

"Say! Say! But we've got to do it. You know where Uzice is? "

"Approximately. Somewhere on the railway from Cacak to Sarajevo. Cosy little place in the mountains."

"If you could travel in a straight line, it would be only seventy miles from Belgrade. But you can't get there along a straight line or any line. By road it's nearer a hundred and twenty miles—with the detours and probable chases it will be close on two hundred. What do you propose to do? Walk? Ride a mule? Or travel in a tank which the German High Command would lend with its best compliments? "

The conversation was carried on in a low voice and in English—certainly a strange language for Serbian gipsies to speak. The broad, big man was again behind the bar, the pretty girl was still polishing the same glasses which were already far too clean for such a dive. Another man was leaning

against the vault of the entrance, gazing upwards into the darkness with a display of keen interest. But these three were listening with one ear to the discussion in the back of the room. Stephen Barrett, looking like a dangerous rake in his gipsy costume, was sitting in the centre. Count Martin Kalnoki, a very handsome Romany *chal*, was leaning back on the bench, shuffling a pack of greasy cards. And Paddy, his red hair flaming in the murky half-light, was pounding the table in his excitement.

These six people—for of course Furka, Eve and Katona made up the rest of the party—had grown so close together in the months which had passed since that tragic night in Budapest that they had evolved a sort of highly efficient telepathy. They needed few words to transmit their thoughts; a half-hint, a raised eyebrow, a nod was sufficient. They had shared danger and hardship; the incredible pleasure of a square meal after weeks of semi-starvation on bread and water—and all the other vicissitudes. They had all proved their mettle and their power of endurance. Their bodies were free of every ounce of superfluous fat and their muscles became like whipcord. Furka was almost gaunt, for his immense frame needed more covering than their Spartan diet and strenuous activity left him. Eve, frail, spoiled Eve who had been waited on hand and foot all her life, found unsuspected reserves of strength. Though her eyes were shadowed with blue and her skin grew more transparent, she never faltered or lagged behind. Her training in the hunting-field and the swimming-bath—once she won the women's championship in a contest which took the swimmers across Lake Balaton—stood her in good stead. Stephen, Katona and Paddy were in good shape before they set out on their adventures. Young Count Martin was sustained in the trying days by the knowledge that the light of his life and love of his heart was at his side. Before they had left Hungary they had been married in a quiet country church.

"My, I have seen newly-weds choose strange honeymoons, but yours is certainly the craziest choice," Paddy had remarked.

Count Martin had smiled—perhaps for the first time since

that April night. "There is little choice about it," he had said. "And as no insurance company would accept either of us as a reasonable risk, we cannot afford to wait. And we know that we shall survive. . . ."

Only four days after they crossed the frontier into Yugoslavia, the Germans unleashed their attack. Wisely Katona steered them away from Belgrade, as soon as he heard that it had been declared an open town.

"The Germans are sure to bomb it heavily," he said. "And you can't argue with Stukas."

The first few weeks of the war found them in the corner of Yugoslavia abutting on Rumania and Bulgaria. Here the Ragged Guard had strong local centres. Rumanian peasants who found General Antonescu just as hateful as the Iron Guards; Hungarian agricultural workers who had fled from Horthy's regime; Bulgarian adherents of Stambulinsky's policy; Albanian patriots; a handful of Greeks who were cut off from their country by the sudden march of events—practically all the Balkan nationalities had their representatives in this motley crowd. They were united in their hatred of the usurpers and despoilers of the Balkans, the legions of the gimcrack Cæsar and the jackbooted hordes of the psychopathic pseudo-Napoleon. . . . Perhaps after the war had ended they would fly at each other's throats; perhaps they had little in common except their hatred. But in those terrible weeks while the Yugoslav Army disintegrated under the furious onslaught, while Hungarian and Bulgarian troops marched to easy plunder and the Greeks girded their loins for a far more fatal foe than the Wolves of Tuscany, these men and women discovered, not without surprise, that their comrades, whatever faith or country they called their own, were human, too . . . that it would be easier to live in peace with them than carry on the slaughter for generations. . . .

It was a short-lived "state" which the Ragged Guard set up somewhere in the mountains, rising so steeply from the plains of Moravia and the Timok, from the marshy banks of the Danube. Stephen Barrett, Count Martin and his young wife, the imperturbable Furka, forthright Katona and firebrand Paddy left before it dissolved. Most of the Ragged Guard

members were moving farther west to join the man who had never given up the fight, who was reorganizing the remnants of the Yugoslav Army in the mountain fastnesses of Rudnik, Bukulja, Prijeljina and Maljen. But now Barrett insisted that their group at least should make its headquarters in Belgrade.

"The Nazis will install the nerve centre of their organization in the capital," he argued. "That's where we can pick up useful information, create a system which distributes it. For us danger is everywhere—why shouldn't we face a little more for a great deal of profit?"

They had found the gipsy disguise efficient in Hungary; they tried it again. The owner of the "Gay Gipsy" was killed in an air-raid; his wife wanted to take her seven children to Croatia where she had some relatives—not dreaming that Ante Pavelitch's *ustachi* gangsters would classify the carefree and innocent gipsies, together with Serbians and Jews, as arch-enemies of the Ruritanian Croat State—and so Furka, who acted as go-between, had little difficulty in arranging a deal. The six adventurers moved in and soon did a good trade in what little wine there was left—mainly because Furka was formidable enough to keep away quarrelsome patrons, and Eve lovely enough to attract those who could still afford a drink or two. . . .

On their long trek from the Rumanian border to Belgrade, Barrett raised a question which had been in his mind ever since he and his companions crossed into Yugoslavia from Hungary.

"Tell me," he asked one night, when they had found a precarious haven in a mountain cave, "how can you four—you, Katona, and you, too, Furka, Martin and Eve—how can you fight against your own kith and kin? After all, you are Magyars—and you have always hated and distrusted the Slavs . . . How did this change come? Oh, I know that the Premier's suicide was a terrible blow for you, and that you hate the Nazis worse than poison . . . but I still don't understand . . ."

"That is because you are English," answered Eve and her young face was serious. "You British are bad haters and you always manage to see both sides of a question. We are differ-

ent. For us the issues are always clear-cut; and we do not ask questions once we have chosen our faith. . . ."

"Perhaps there is more to it," continued Count Martin, putting his ragged cloak round his wife's shoulder. "You see, those of my countrymen who are fighting now in Hitler's pay . . . and especially those who have sent them into this shameful war . . . they are like men who have temporarily lost their reason. If you see a man run amok in the street, brandishing a dagger, won't you try to disarm him . . . even if he is your own brother? Probably a hundred times more if he is your own brother. That is how I . . . and I think the others in our company . . . feel about our fellow-countrymen. They have parted from reason . . . but we believe that they can be brought back to it. And the others who . . . who aren't our brothers . . . who have had sufficient reason to hate and distrust the Hungarians . . . they might find an understanding easier with us who are on their side if we show clearly where our sympathies lie. . . . It is a hard fight, for all the time we have to do battle with ourselves . . . but it's worth all the sacrifice. . . ."

They were all silent then, and Barrett's mind was relieved of the load of a difficult problem. And somehow, from that day on, he saw his own task and his own goal in a different light. He was no longer only a British agent, trying to serve his country . . . he shared in a dream for wider horizons, for greater happiness than one nation could encompass. . . .

"But you still haven't answered my question how you plan to get those precious drugs and what-nots to Uzice," insisted Paddy. He had grown considerably more realistic and matter-of-fact in the past months. He was still rushing in where angels feared to tread—but he was doing it with more circumspection.

"Very simply," replied Barrett with a smile. "You, my friend, are going to steal a German army lorry to-morrow evening."

"I? Steal a . . . Have you gone crazy?" spluttered the Irish-American. Then he paused for a moment and a wide grin split his bronzed face: "Faith, I will!"

"That's settled then," Stephen said lightly. "You'd better take along Furka in case there is any strong-arm work to be done. By the way, you might just as well get two of those attractive Nazi uniforms and the necessary passes . . . if available. If you happen to be forced into disrobing two Hitler-pets in the process, you'd better do it properly. I mean, they might die of exposure, mightn't they? "

"Do you want all of us to go? " asked Katona.

"I think so," replied Barrett. "If we get away with the theft of the lorry, Belgrade won't be a healthy place for us . . . not that it has ever been. Also, I feel that we are going stale here . . . what have we done for the past two weeks except a little sabotage and one or two cases of kidnapping? We'll lose our touch if we neglect our talents much longer. So this is my plan . . ."

Ante Dobor was watching Dr. Petrovitch with absorbed attention. When the good doctor had told him that the supplies so badly needed by Colonel Michailovitch were to be dispatched next night, he pleaded and begged until his bed was brought down to the laboratory where the packing was to be done. Dr. Petrovitch would never have consented to this request if Dr. Holzhagen had not been safely away on furlough. But the boy was so eager, so pathetically longing to see with his own eyes how the "treasure" for his comrades was being prepared for the road, that a refusal would have been a serious blow to him . . . perhaps even upset his sensitive nervous system and cause a relapse. So he was moved down to the laboratory and stared with big eyes at Dr. Petrovitch, Militza and two of the internes who were packing with extreme care the delicate instruments and large boxes of drugs. Three packing-cases had been produced with God knows what ruses and guiles, and they were rapidly filling up. Now only the nailing-down was left to be done, and as Militza and the two internes had to make the evening rounds in the wards, Dr. Petrovitch good-humouredly undertook to finish the work alone.

Only the third case was unfastened when the doctor swung round suddenly. There were heavy, unsteady steps moving

along the passage leading to the laboratory. They paused in front of the door. Someone kicked it open, and the next moment Dr. Holzhagen stumbled into the room.

If Dr. Holzhagen had not gone into the dining-car as soon as the train had left Zemun . . . if Dr. Petrovitch had not listened to the childish pleading of Ante Dobor . . . if the cases could have been nailed down earlier . . . but is it not a futile pastime to try and trace cause and effect in every human action? The pitfalls of coincidence are numerous and deep; and we are lucky if we can avoid at least some of them.

Dr. Holzhagen had wired Budapest and reserved a room at the Hôtel Dunapalota. He had been to the Hungarian capital before, and had planned his leave with great care, from breakfast in the garden of the Hangli Restaurant to the discreet box he would share at the Arizona Night Club with that Rumanian redhead—or any other redhead if available. Yet after his train left Zemun he felt a terrible thirst which needed immediate quenching. He hurried to the dining-car, where kindly fate brought him face to face with Baroness Hertha.

Grave doubts exist whether the lady was a Baroness or even a Hertha. But as there is no clue to her real name and rank, we may as well accept her own valuation.

She was blonde and undoubtedly Aryan. In five minutes she had captured Dr. Holzhagen's heart—a very susceptible organ. In an hour he was her slave. And when the train reached Novi Sad he and Baroness Hertha left it. For the lady had some urgent business to transact in that not-too-interesting city, and Dr. Holzhagen felt that Budapest could wait.

They had lunch, tea and dinner together. There was no pressing reason even afterwards to part. Next morning Dr. Holzhagen awoke in his room with a splitting headache. The Baroness had disappeared. So had his wallet with all his money and papers—except his railway pass, which she left with a scrawled note:

"Thank you, *Schnuckerl*. It was sweet of you to give me all the money. Your ever-loving H."

The Novi Sad hotel had harboured in its time many angry

guests, but Dr. Holzhagen almost wrecked the place. Not that it helped him in the least—and so, minus his money, he took the train back to Belgrade. He met a Luftwaffe officer whom he knew slightly, borrowed a few marks from him and proceeded to get drunk as quickly as possible in order to forget the perfidy of women in general, and that of Baroness Hertha in particular.

When he reached Belgrade he was half-drunk and in a vile temper. Now, he thought, now he would show those Serbian swine who was their master. He would kick their dirty hospital to pieces. He would . . . oh, he would find some pretext to give the whole staff the fright of their lives.

And now, when he burst into the laboratory, he found that after all he needed no pretext—none at all. For there, in the middle of the room, was a bed and a pale-looking boy in it . . . and there was Dr. Petrovitch, looking guilty with three packing-cases around him.

"What's this?" shouted Dr. Holzhagen. "What are you doing here?"

Poor, unworldly Dr. Petrovitch tried to lie.

"I . . . I have been opening these cases. Supplies. They just arrived. . . ."

"Opening them? Just arrived?" Holzhagen stumped up to the cases and reached into the third one, which was still open. He took out a leather box filled with hypodermic syringes. The box was stamped with the name of the hospital. A bulkier parcel of antiseptic drugs had also the hospital's initials on it. A slow, wicked grin spread over the German's face.

"Dr. Petrovitch!" he bellowed. "Since when is it usual that supplies reach this hospital already marked with its name? What? Answer, man! Answer!"

The old doctor remained silent.

"I'll tell you what you have been doing! You have been nailing down these cases, not opening them! You were stealing the hospital's property! You were going to leave thousands of your own countrymen exposed to death in order to line your own pockets! Weren't you? Weren't you? You . . . you Serb pig!"

He took hold of the doctor's coat and began to shake him. Still Dr. Petrovitch did not speak. Dr. Holzhagen slapped him across the face, hard.

The next moment he went down on the floor. Forgetting his stump of a leg, his weakness, his youth, Ante Dobor had thrown himself upon the torturer of his best friend. It took the drunken Nazi only a minute to heave the boy's body off himself. Ante writhed on the cold concrete while Dr. Holzhagen roared:

"So! Attack a German! You . . . you scum . . . you . . ." A torrent of abuse cascaded from his mouth. Then he turned again to Dr. Petrovitch. "I'll have you shot . . . all of you. There's not a single Serb fit to be trusted! I'll teach you . . . I'll . . ."

Something hit him on the temple. He went down like a stricken ox. And then, before the old doctor could do anything, the boy had thrown himself on the German. Steel gleamed in his hand as he raised it; he plunged a sharp awl into Holzhagen's breast . . . once . . . twice . . . again and again. . . . Suddenly his body arched and he fell across the Nazi.

When Dr. Petrovitch bent down to lift him, Ante Dobor was dead. And for the first time since he had begun to live this waking nightmare, the old doctor was unable to check the flood of tears. . . .

"You are coming with us," Stephen Barrett said, in a tone which did not seem to expect any contradiction.

"But I can't!" protested Dr. Petrovitch. "That would be tantamount to deserting my post."

"Nonsense," put in Katona who, with Stephen, had come into the laboratory to reconnoitre the ground before starting to load the cases. "Do you think they need no doctors at Uzice? Also . . . it would be better to make yourself scarce if the Nazis should, after all, find Dr. Holzhagen's body."

The two "gipsies" had listened to the old doctor's somewhat incoherent story with some anxiety. The only chance to save not only Dr. Petrovitch but his whole staff from a messy and painful death was to remove all traces of the strange,

desperate struggle in the laboratory. Militza and the others had made a half-hearted start on this task, but Barrett's keen eyes noticed several things they had left undone. The German's armband with the garish swastika had become torn and had been kicked underneath the table; a bloodstain or two was still gleaming freshly on the concrete.

"You'd better tell the others to wait a little longer," Stephen said to Katona, and the Hungarian slipped into the night. Then Barrett turned to Dr. Petrovitch. "Well, have you made up your mind?" he asked. "You know, there's quite a good chance that the late and unlamented Dr. Holzhagen had returned for reasons of his own and his superiors don't know anything about it. In that case, your own disappearance might have no consequences at all. We cannot afford to take more chances—we have taken a good many already."

This was definitely an understatement. For in the last three hours Barrett & Co. had taken chances which no sane man would have dreamt of taking. They had stolen a fully laden lorry and had kidnapped a German sergeant and a corporal-driver. They had done all this by the simplest method of offering some wine for sale when the lorry had stopped before taking the road for Sabac. It was Eve who stood in the light of the headlamps and waved a stone jar. Her beauty and the startling impudence of trying to stop one of the conqueror's vehicles in the middle of the road was sufficient for the driver to jam on the brakes. The girl was pretty though rather coy, the wine was cool and smooth. It was also drugged. Before the two men could climb back into the lorry, they were both knocked out. The lorry was loaded with food supplies for the officers' mess in Sabac—tins of condensed milk, chocolate, flour and sugar—which would all be very welcome to the soldiers at Uzice. They found some empty sacks used to protect the cargo against the jolts of the heavily damaged road along the Sava. The Germans, stripped to the skin, were disposed of in four of these sacks after they had been bound and gagged.

"They might suffocate, you know," Paddy said thoughtfully, but somehow his companions could not show much concern about this probability. Still, he slit two air-holes in

the sacks. The sergeant was a big beefy fellow, but even so Furka had some difficulty in getting into his uniform. The corporal was smaller—Stephen found that his trousers and tunic fitted him tolerably well. The other members of the party found two sacks each which would serve as "camouflage" in case the lorry was stopped.

It was rather a tight fit to get the three cases of medical supplies wedged in between the rest of the load, but in the end it was done. Then the grizzly cargo of Dr. Holzhagen's body had to be added, and finally Dr. Petrovitch climbed on the lorry. Militza and the young doctors came out to see them off. The old doctor became almost incoherent in his excitement. His last words were about Ante Dobor—asking them to bury the boy in the hospital cemetery and to take care of his grave. Not that this request was necessary—but it served to cover his grief and confusion. Apart from an old, shabby coat, he had brought away nothing with him; Stephen thought there was a better chance of a head start if he left all his personal possessions behind.

In the small compartment in front of the driving-seat Furka had found the passes and orders for the lorry. It was destined for Sabac; and they were not going to Sabac. But that was a risk they had to take as an added one to so many. For a short distance they might follow the road along the Sava towards the west, then they would have to turn almost due south for Lazarevac and Valjevo.

The road was incredibly bad. In the spring the innumerable military vehicles had churned up the mud; then the sun baked the deep ruts and the wind covered them with a thick layer of dust. There had been no rain now for some weeks; the night was hot and close. As the lorry bumped its way from one side of the road to the other, the adventurous company gritted its teeth and tried to avoid being bruised by the sharp corners of the packing-cases. They did not always succeed, and Eve, half-enveloped in her sack, told her husband that she must be already black and blue. But they held hands and did not seem to mind the jolting. Dr. Petrovitch was so exhausted that he dropped off into an uneasy sleep; the three Germans were quiet enough—Dr. Holzhagen, safe in the Nazi Valhalla,

and the two soldiers in the Never-Never Land of the Unconscious.

Some distance beyond Belgrade they stopped on the banks of the Sava. Dr. Holzhagen's body was removed and carefully weighted with some wire and a few stones found on the river-bank. Then Furka and Paddy swung it into the darkness and heard the splash a fair distance from the shore.

"Reducing the evidence," murmured Paddy. "I wish I had met the swine while he was alive. I'd have enjoyed this much more."

They drove on, for the nights were short and they had a long distance to cover before dawn. When it came they were beyond Lazarevac, though still on the plain. They found a small copse where they camouflaged the lorry as well as they could and made a somewhat sketchy meal of the foodstuffs they had with themselves. They all stretched their limbs after the cramped, unpleasant night and debated what to do with the two Germans.

"There are a couple of nice trees right above us," said Furka, whose mind was running on straightforward lines.

"Two less would make little difference—but it would still be two less," admitted Katona.

"It would be unsporting," protested Paddy. "We ought to give them a chance to fight it out."

"A chance?" repeated Count Martin. "What chance did the Nazis give the refugees in Poland, Belgium and France? What chance did they give to the people of Rotterdam and Belgrade? What fair fight did they offer to the Greeks or the Norwegians after they had crushed them?"

"Well, whatever you say about Nazi morals—and I think they are pretty stinking—I still don't like to play hangman," said Barrett. "I vote that we carry them a little farther along and then hand them over to the *chetniks*. Let them decide what to do with uninvited guests. . . ."

There was a little opposition from Furka and Count Martin, but in the end they accepted Stephen's proposal. It was his suggestion, too, that they should try and rest until nightfall as they had a much better chance to escape being stopped if

they only travelled in darkness. So they dozed and talked and smoked—there were many thousands of excellent Bulgarian cigarettes on the lorry, also irrevocably lost to the officers' mess at Sabac. When their two prisoners revived and showed some signs of life, Paddy fed them and then replaced their gags with the admonition to keep quiet. They, being used to getting ordered about, obeyed.

They made a wide detour round Valjevo which, having been recaptured by the Germans, was certain to be heavily garrisoned. Soon afterwards the road began to climb. It was not a good road, and Furka performed minor miracles in keeping the lorry on it. Sometimes the cliffs fell away steeply on both sides and a few inches would have hurled them to a nasty death. The bumping and jolting was even worse than the night before. And then, a mile or so before Razana, they were halted by a harsh, guttural command.

The passengers suddenly disappeared in their sacks. A torch flashed. In response Furka switched on the powerful headlamps. A German officer and two privates were standing in the middle of the road.

"Where do you think you are going?" rasped the officer.

"Urgent supplies for Uzice, *Herr Major*," replied Furka with a somewhat belated salute.

"Uzice? Have you gone crazy? The bandits' outposts are half a mile down this road. Not only Uzice, Kosjerici is also held by them. You must turn round at once. Take the stuff back to Valjevo. . . ."

"But, *Herr Major*, my orders were . . ."

Furka was playing for time. He knew that if there were other roads to Uzice they would never find them in the dark, and if they did they would be probably impassable for the heavy lorry.

"Silence!" the officer shouted. "Show me your papers!"

Furka bent down as if obeying the command. At the same time he twisted the wheel sharply and trod on the accelerator. The lorry leapt forward. The officer and the two soldiers jumped for their lives. Furka's mind, as he had proved often enough, was simple and straightforward. The same trick had worked a few months ago just outside Miskolc when the

Hungarian officer had wanted to commandeer their car. Why shouldn't it work again?

It did. There was a sharp scream of pain as one of the fenders hit the officer. Shots rang out, a revolver spat fire in the darkness. Furka was putting on more speed. Luckily the road dipped here and they did not have to climb. Madly the lorry went careering downhill, with bullets still whistling above them and shouts calling on them to stop.

Another group of soldiers barred their way. Furka gritted his teeth and accelerated. One of them jumped too late and they heard the sickening crunch of wheels on human flesh. On they went in the June darkness. There was nothing else to do. The passengers held on as best they could. Barrett watched the road—as much as there was to see of it. Then the shouting and shooting stopped and a sudden silence descended. They seemed to be alone in the night.

Now there was a warning shot. Furka could not stop soon enough; a bullet flattened the offside front tyre, the lorry skidded badly and then came to rest with its front wheels hanging well over the edge of the road. No one could tell what was there, beyond the edge—a ditch or a drop of a hundred feet—but the passengers had little time to speculate on that. They were surrounded by about a hundred men. It was a motley crowd, some in the uniform of the Yugoslav Army, others in nondescript peasant clothes, while one old gentleman was dressed rather incongruously in a black alpaca frock-coat. But they were all armed and seemed to be most businesslike.

“Get out!”

There was little else to do except to obey. Furka and Stephen climbed from the lorry. The rest of the Ragged Guard remained invisible and inaudible, awaiting developments.

The old gentleman in the alpaca coat stepped forward. Apparently he could speak German.

“Where are you coming from?” he asked.

“Belgrade,” replied Barrett.

“And where were you going?”

“To Colonel Michailovitch's headquarters.”

“What?”

Stephen offered an explanation which became more and

more involved as it progressed. But in the meantime the *chetniks* had investigated the load of the lorry and found the rest of the party—including the two Germans stripped to their underwear. Dr. Petrovitch proved to be more helpful in establishing the company's bona fides than the others, though their captors still kept them covered. The lorry was righted, the spare wheel put into position, and then the whole crowd started towards Uzice—the headquarters of the man who had proved that an army is never defeated just because its enemy says so. . . .

Uzice has little claim to special beauty or historical significance; though it was here that Mata, the peasant prophet, rushed through the streets one June morning and proclaimed loudly that Michael Obrenovitch had been murdered. As he did this more than twenty-four hours before the news of the Prince's assassination reached Uzice, the authorities were rather suspicious. But Mata, the peasant, turned out to be a real seer whose prophecies foretold with startling accuracy his country's fate for the next seventy or eighty years. . . .

Yet perhaps not even the peasant prophet had foreseen all the horrors which the Brown Plague would bring to Serbia. How could he dream of abominations like the Stukas and the Gestapo, the mass executions, the deliberate enslaving of a proud and warrior people, the looting of a country's food to starve its population into submission and fill the Nazi granaries, of quislings, hostage-shootings and "punitive expeditions"? The clearest crystal must have been clouded by the gory mist of these terrors.

And here in Uzice, the forces of Colonel Michailovitch found a fortress for the time being. They held some of the surrounding towns and villages; as a matter of fact in some districts the Germans held little except the bigger cities, and even there the *chetniks* were often in occupation of the outskirts so that the "conquerors" seldom ventured out except in large parties.

Uzice was well chosen for headquarters. Astride the railway line from Cacak to Sarajevo, lying at the meeting of important highways, placed between the mountainside and the Morava, it could be easily defended against any surprise attack. The

neighbouring country provided food. As the city was in a hollow at the bottom of a fairly deep ravine, it was difficult for the bombers to approach it. Some tried but their bombs fell wide of their mark, and many of them crashed in the gullies and wild mountain ranges. To the south Zlatibor rose to almost five thousand feet, to the north Povlen towered to the same height. The *chetniks* had utilized the natural advantages of their position; the caves in the mountainside were enlarged and furnished for shelter and concealment; and in a disused mill they had established a small arms factory which provided weapons and ammunition for all those soldiers and civilians who had not managed to bring along their arms when, through devious routes, they had joined the *chetnik* army.

Stephen Barrett and his companions found that their best credentials were provided not by the two captive Germans, not by Dr. Petrovitch, nor by letters which they had brought from the Ragged Guard leaders on the Rumano-Yugoslav frontier—but by the three cases of medical supplies and the foodstuffs which they had denied so successfully to the officers' mess of Sabac. When the Colonel with the keen, clear-cut face and the penetrating dark eyes heard what they had brought, he told Stephen:

"I can imagine a great many tricks which the Nazis would devise to get me and my men into their clutches . . . but I don't think that they would give me the things I need most in order to plant their agents in my camp. . . ."

"So you will permit us to join you, sir?" asked Barrett, considerably relieved.

"My dear friend," smiled Colonel Michailovitch, "there's no way back from Uzice. Those who have come here must fight and die with us. . . ."

He was a very busy man, this youthful-looking Serbian officer who held the chance of his country's survival in his strong, capable hands. But he found time to have a few words with every member of Barrett's party, and his blue eyes sized them up quickly.

"I am not going to give you any special assignments," he said. "Spend a few days with us and find a place for yourselves. Then come and tell me what you would like best to

do. We need every man and woman who is willing to work with us."

This was not a difficult task for Dr. Petrovitch and Eve. The old doctor discovered half a dozen colleagues in the hospital which was reduced almost to its last roll of bandage and final bottle of iodine. There were about two hundred wounded or sick men lying in the rough bunks, and the drugs and instruments which had cost Ante Dobor's life, meant for many of them just the difference between life and death. Eve took up nursing with a number of other women who had been battling against the lack of medical supplies for many weary weeks. Now they became more hopeful; at least for the next two or three months they had what they needed most.

Count Martin and Katona attached themselves to the scouting parties which undertook continuous small expeditions of sabotage and ambush. They were greatly helped by the fact that practically every peasant within a hundred miles was serving as a voluntary agent for Colonel Michailovitch's forces. Often at considerable risk to themselves they brought news of Nazi troop movements; reporting where there was a weaker garrison, a fatigue party working with comparatively few guards, an important bridge to be blown up or a stretch of railway line whose destruction would disrupt German military traffic.

Paddy made a bee-line for the small group of Yugoslav aviators who had escaped from the wholesale destruction of the Serbian Air Force which had been the first move in the Nazi attack. Some of them had flown their machines to Russia; others into the mountains where they landed in spaces hardly sufficient to turn round a baby car. Most of their machines were "old crates", damaged, beyond repair. Yet they set up a miniature factory and made one plane out of two or three, restored to usefulness those still serviceable. They had added to their dwarf squadron three or four German machines, stolen from Nazi aerodromes. They were a happy-go-lucky lot, most of them under twenty-four. They were guarding and servicing their machines with the care due to precious treasures. No mother could have nursed her child with greater affection than these youngsters did their few air-

craft. They also went in for amateur bomb manufacture, and were waiting impatiently for the moment when Colonel Michailovitch would send them out on their first bombing raid. . . .

Furka, too, discovered the right hole for his own rotundity. He became foreman in the small arms factory, and the girls and older men who worked there soon began to fear and love him as a relentless driver of his "people". For Furka looked upon this small and primitive factory as something wonderful which he adopted as his very own—and woe to the man or girl who spoiled some of the hard-won materials or was not quick enough to pick up some new labour-saving method. Yet his bark was worse than his bite—and for the first time since he had met him, Stephen Barrett heard him whistle and saw him smile.

As for Stephen himself he was "attached" to the small but highly efficient General Staff which Colonel Michailovitch had organized. It was perhaps the strangest General Staff in the world, for side by side with professional soldiers it consisted of farmers, engineers and a professor or two. Barrett spent a great deal of his time in one of the large caves where a wireless station had been set up. Here messages were encoded and deciphered and a powerful short-wave set worked day and night. It was an excellent set, for originally it had been destined to serve the Nazi G.H.Q. at Belgrade. The *chetniks* had got wind of its dispatch from Vienna and by weeks of careful planning managed to "acquire" it.

This peculiar army was growing day by day. Peasants vanished from their farms, workers made their way from the devastated towns, young students forsook their books; and of course soldiers in small or larger groups managed to outwit the occupying forces to join Colonel Michailovitch. The leaders of the *chetniks* knew that they must husband their strength and that their watchword must be patience. They were daring when a sudden swoop promised success; but they took no unnecessary risks. The possibility of defeat did not enter into their thoughts; and it was with considerable amusement that they read or listened to the periodical announcements of the Nazis, according to which the "rebels and bandits" had been

completely annihilated. For men and women who were "exterminated", Colonel Michailovitch's forces enjoyed remarkable health. . . .

It was on a Sunday morning when Stephen had persuaded the exhausted young radio operator to have a short rest and let him take over his duties for a few hours that the astounding and yet not so unexpected news came over the air. The voice of Goebbels had lost a little of its usual superiority when he read out the long rigmarole Adolf Hitler had composed to justify his attack on the Soviet Union. Scarcely had he begun to speak when Stephen woke the young wireless operator and sent him flying for Colonel Michailovitch and his staff. Soon the cave was filled with a large crowd while the limping dwarf of Nazidom continued to spout accusations, blatant lies and confused arguments.

"... The result was an intensification of the Soviet activities directed against the Reich . . . in particular the undermining of the Rumanian State and an attempt to overthrow the Bulgarian Government. . . . Only the rapid advance of our incomparable divisions to Skoplje, as well as the capture of Salonika itself, frustrated the aims of the Soviet Russian-Anglo-Saxon front. The officers of the Serbian Air Force, however, fled into Russia. In the meantime the Soviets were steadily . . . increasing their readiness for war in order finally, together with Britain and supported by the American supplies anticipated, to throttle and crush the German Reich and Italy. . . . Moscow not only broke but miserably betrayed the stipulations of our friendly agreement. . . ."

This went on and on; it seemed that the more barefaced the aggression, the viler the attack, the more words Adolf Hitler needed to make his actions palatable to his own people. And then the nauseatingly pious conclusion.

"I have therefore decided to-day once again to entrust the fate and future of the German Reich and of our nation to the hands of our soldiers. May our Lord God aid us in this the greatest of all struggles. . . ."

"You said it, brother," remarked Paddy, who had materialized from somewhere, in a loud and almost jubilant voice.

"This time Adolf has bitten off a good deal more than he can chew in a year of Sundays. . . ."

Captain Raditch, one of Colonel Michailovitch's young aides-de-camp, was turning the knobs of the wireless until he got Moscow. And while the Russian words rang out, he translated quickly, smoothly, the torrent of Molotov's speech.

"To-day at four o'clock in the morning, without giving any reason to the Soviet Government . . . and without a declaration of war . . . German forces attacked our country . . . invaded our frontiers in many places . . . and raided our towns of Zhitomir . . . Kiev . . . Sevastopol . . . Kaunas . . . and several others. More than two hundred people were killed . . . and wounded. . . . This unheard-of attack . . . is without example in the history of civilized nations. . . ."

Stephen glanced around. Almost every face in the dimly lit cave wore an expression of amazement mingled with exultation. At first he could not quite understand why this was so. Then he heard Colonel Michailovitch say:

"Captain Raditch . . . will you ask the staff to meet me in fifteen minutes at the usual place. . . ."

On his way out he stopped near Barrett and said in a low yet jubilant voice:

"Now . . . now at last our patience will be rewarded! For we have an ally near enough and powerful enough to carry us on to victory!"

And this was the sentiment shared by the whole General Staff meeting. Though at first there were some wildly impractical suggestions as to "joining up" with the Russian forces, slowly the general plan emerged: to get in touch immediately with the Yugoslav Government in London and ask them to suggest the best ways and means of Russo-Yugoslav co-operation. Colonel Michailovitch himself drafted the message and Stephen sat down to encode it.

Furka was worried. He knew it could not be helped—yet it was "mighty aggravatin'", as Paddy would have put it. The giant ex-masseur was learning "American" at considerable speed because it was his firm conviction that sooner or later the doughboys would be "coming over", and he wished

nothing finer than to fight side by side with them—wherever a convenient scrape could be started with the Nazis. But in whatever language he considered the matter, it seemed somehow wrong that the explosives used to fill hand-grenades, “Molotov cocktails” and other bombs should be kept so near to the forge where battered rifles, revolvers and machine-guns were hammered and twisted into weapons once more efficient for the business of killing Germans. Furka felt a personal responsibility for this primitive and yet so essential factory the *chetniks* had established for themselves in the old mill. He hardly snatched any sleep, prowling night and day to see that no accident would happen. For if a fire broke out the factory and the improvised barracks next door would all be blown sky-high. And Colonel Michailovitch was depending on the output of these workshops—depending on them for arming the steady flow of new troops which flocked to his flag. . . .

The huge man was just considering whether he should take another stroll through the factory when an ominous smell assailed his nostrils. He sniffed once or twice to make sure that he had not erred. No, it was the smell of smoke . . . of a fire somewhere nearby. He knew that the forge was not working just now as they were engaged in sorting out material recently captured in a raid; nor could it be the smoke of a cooking fire as it was severely forbidden to light one within five hundred yards of the old mill. He jumped to his feet and rushed to the main hall of the factory, a large, barnlike structure. For a second he paused aghast on the threshold. A girl was screaming in the middle of the room, her hair aflame. A carbide lamp—which should have never been brought inside—was hissing fiercely on the floor. It had been upset by some clumsy movement, and apparently the girl’s hair caught fire when she had tried to retrieve it. Already a coil of rope next to it was burning. There were a few wooden benches and tables not far off. If they caught fire . . .

Furka covered the distance between the girl and himself in a few strides. The buckets of water which he had had always kept filled were close by, lined up against the wall. He snatched up one and lifted it to empty the water on the girl’s

head. But she was almost out of her mind with pain and terror; with a sudden movement she avoided him and rushed towards the door of the room in which the explosives were kept. Furka jumped to ward her off and managed to give her the cold douche at the same time. Then he turned wildly to stamp out the creeping fire between the coil of rope and the piled-up benches and tables. He lost a precious half-minute while he found another bucket of water; for half of them were empty, probably used and not refilled immediately as they should have been. By this time the fire had reached the door of the explosives' room. There were shavings on the floor, small pieces of wood and rope . . . and the trail of the fire seemed to twist and turn in a dozen directions like a river with many channels. Furka snatched up a blanket, shouting to the girl who was half-blinded to run out and warn everybody in the vicinity to scatter. She stumbled towards the door while he rolled himself into the blanket and proceeded to beat out the flames with the weight of his body. Yet the fire suddenly leapt the distance between the last coil of rope and the door. Furka flung himself against this door and discovered that it was locked. Of course, he kept the key in his pocket. . . . He fumbled for it with scorched fingers. Already the lower part of the door was on fire. Once more he rushed for a bucket of water, at the same time extracting the key from his trousers. If he could tear off the door from its hinges and . . .

And then he stumbled and fell, hitting his head against one of the benches. The blow stunned him. He gritted his teeth and half-rose. But it was too late. He saw a blinding flash before the world seemed to dissolve into fiery particles in front of his eyes and the floor heaved under his body. Then came the noise, unbearably loud and prolonged, the thunder of destruction and the drums of death. . . . His last conscious thought was that perhaps he was not giving up life in vain . . . and that now he would never fight side by side with American doughboys. . . .

They buried Furka and the twelve men who were killed in the explosion near the river, in a little copse. If it had not been for him the death roll would have been far higher. The

girl, responsible through some hare-brained carelessness for the disaster, joined one of the raiding parties detailed to blow up a bridge and was killed herself. They gave Furka a military funeral with full honours. A bugle held the long, mournful, sweet note for what seemed to be an unbearable length of time. It was dawn and the river swathed in mist. Three volleys rang out, and then they all turned back to the hillside camp.

An hour before the funeral Colonel Michailovitch called a meeting of his staff. They discussed calmly and soberly the implications of the explosion. A considerable part of their equipment had been destroyed; and, what was more serious, their means of manufacturing small arms had perished at the same time. The Germans, with their inexhaustible supply of heavier armament, were only ten or fifteen miles away; and while they had probably not yet found out about the catastrophe, they were bound to do so before long. Draza Michailovitch knew what was at stake; he knew that he could not risk encirclement with inferior forces at his command. The meeting decided that Uzice must be abandoned and the *chetnik* forces must be withdrawn still deeper into the mountain fastnesses of Zetska. A detailed plan was worked out as to the means of withdrawal without giving away anything to the Germans; a small force under Captain Raditch was chosen to fight a delaying action if necessary. When all the particulars were arranged the meeting adjourned, but Michailovitch kept Barrett back.

"I have a special task for you and your friends," he said.

"Yes, Colonel," replied Barrett who had learned to respect this taciturn soldier. He knew that Michailovitch would fight as long as he had one soldier or one gun left.

"I want you to go to Cetinje," Michailovitch continued. "I had news to-day about the Montenegrins preparing an organized revolt against the Italians. Mussolini's hold is precarious enough, but apparently they want to chase the Italian garrison out of their capital. I want you to tell them that they must wait until I give them the signal. I may be able to send them help and I don't want them to strike prematurely. This Russian war will draw away considerable German forces. If

we attack the remaining troops at the same time at different points they won't have the chance of transferring reinforcements from one district to the other. I want you to take all the others with you—except Dr. Petrovitch who would hardly stand up to the rigours of such a trip—because the more numerous you are the more chance you have of getting through. I must tell you frankly that even so the chances are not too good. You have to travel about a hundred and fifty miles over bad roads or no roads at all. The Germans and Italians have strong garrisons at some points. Speed is essential if you want to stop the Montenegrins in time. I am giving you a guide, but I cannot spare any of my soldiers. Will you ask your friends whether they are prepared to go? "

" There is no need to ask them," Stephen said quietly. " I am sure they'll consider it a great honour."

Colonel Michailovitch nodded.

" Then you can start to-night. . . ."

Stephen Barrett found it difficult not to smile when in the afternoon their " guide " presented himself at the mouth of the cave which he shared with Paddy. For the person whom Colonel Michailovitch had chosen to lead them over the mountains was a boy who looked about twelve and could have hardly been more than fifteen. He had coal-black hair, dark eyes and full red lips; he was clad in a costume which Prince-Bishop Peter of Montenegro would not have scorned: a white coat, full blue trousers and a scarlet sash into which a dagger and two revolvers were carelessly thrust. His teeth were very white.

" I am Danilo," he said, and offered his hand without a trace of embarrassment. He spoke English with a strong American accent. " I am going to take you to Cetinje. You can be sure that we'll get there. I know."

" I am glad you are so confident, Danilo," replied Stephen gravely. " How old are you? "

" Almost fifteen," the boy said. Then he hesitated. " At least I'll be fifteen in eight months," he added. " Doesn't growing up take a long time! "

" And where did you learn English? " enquired Paddy.

"In Chicago," answered Danilo. "My . . . my people used to live there until I was ten. Then we had enough money and came home. But we found that grandfather was dead and that my father's older brother did not like us very much. So we moved to Kragujevac. We . . . we stayed there until . . ."

His handsome face clouded and he fell silent. Barrett prompted him gently:

"Until you had to come here . . . with your parents. . . ."

The boy shook his head.

"No," he said. "They are dead. My two brothers are also dead. I . . . I don't know where my sister is. . . ."

With a sudden gesture he tore open his embroidered shirt. There was a freshly healed, deep scar a few inches above his heart.

"They tried to kill me, too," he said. "But they couldn't. I . . . I am tough, see? "

Barrett would have preferred not to revive what must have been painful enough memories for this "tough" youngster, but Paddy had retained his journalistic curiosity.

"Where did that happen, Danilo?" he asked casually.

"Why, in Kragujevac, of course!" the boy said with evident pity for someone who did not know. Two conflicting emotions were struggling in him, mirrored on his face—the remembrance of the bleak horrors and his pride of having survived them. "A short time after the Germans came they turned one of our churches into barracks. There were some people praying in front of the altar when they came and kicked them out. My . . . my sister was hurt. Then my father and my two brothers collected all their kinsmen and friends . . . and the same night they set fire to the church. Twenty . . . maybe twenty-three Germans died. . . ."

"And what happened then?" pressed Paddy, though he should have known the answer.

"Many tanks came and machine-guns and bigger guns. The Germans went from house to house. They took away all the men and the older boys. They did not want to take me, and my mother tried to hide me, but I didn't want to stay

behind. And they marched us to the big barracks on the edge of the town . . . and they killed almost all of us. . . . A hundred Jugoslavs for every German soldier, they said. I was terribly afraid, but I didn't try to run away. I stood there with my father and my two brothers. They hit me . . . here . . . and they thought I was dead. But in the evening they opened the gates and told the women to cart away the dead. And so my mother came and found me. I wasn't hurt . . . much. Then, a week later, my mother died. Her heart was . . . weak, and she grieved for my sister whom they took away . . . to some bad place. And then I ran away and came first to Rudnik and then to Uzice. . . ."

He looked at the two men, defying them to show compassion which his pride would have scorned. But both were shrewd judges of character and neither of them would commit such a cardinal sin.

"So you are quite a soldier," said Barrett. "Well, I am certainly glad that the fate of our party is in such capable hands. But how is it that you know these mountains so well?"

"I have been three times across them since I came to Uzice," smiled Danilo. "And I can read maps, too!"

Stephen was loath to question the Colonel's wisdom in the choice of their guide, but when he had a last talk before their start with him he could not help asking:

"Do you think that we can trust Danilo's judgment in . . . everything?"

Colonel Michailovitch smiled.

"He is a very skilful young man. Only he is a little rash and you must watch him on that point." He added in a more serious tone: "I have another good reason for sending him away. There is every chance that we shall have to fight hard battles during our withdrawal. And this young boy has courted death in every engagement in which he took part during the last six weeks. There were a good many . . . I feel that he is not too fond of life. And I thought that if I gave him one definite task which kept him busy he might discover that he still might expect happiness in the days to come. He is so young, after all. . . ."

During this last meeting he amplified his instructions. Barrett and his companions were to visit a number of guerilla centres on their way to notify the scattered leaders of the big conference which was to be held near Cetinje in August. He received names and descriptions "to avoid any misunderstanding"—and he was careful to memorize the list and then destroy it before they set out.

"It's just like old times," laughed Eve when, with the minimum of personal belongings in their rucksacks, they slipped from the camp on the first stage on their journey. "I felt I was going stale without an occasional hike. . . ."

Count Martin smiled at his wife. Yet his voice hid a slight undertone of anxiety:

"Yes, isn't it grand? But I hope it won't be more than just a pleasant hike. . . ."

They made good going the first night, covering eighteen miles in the darkness among the foothills which brought them to the outskirts of a little town called Ljubis. They could have gone on to Jasenova, another fourteen kilometres along the road, but Barrett restrained Danilo's enthusiasm for quick marching. He knew that they had to save their strength, for there would be nights when they would have to cover twice this distance and perhaps fight at the same time. Like a trainer nursing his thoroughbreds, he watched the members of his party. There were only two on whose account he was a little afraid: Eve and Danilo. But Eve, in spite of her frail appearance, was sturdy enough, and Danilo seemed to be happier on the road than ever before.

There was another reason why they stopped to rest a little short of Ljubis. One of the guerilla leaders whom Michailovitch wanted to be present at the "staff conference" was reported to be in the neighbourhood. The arranged "contact signal" was a red rocket to be fired at midnight, upon which the man Stephen wanted to meet would appear. It sounded like a rather vague arrangement, but Barrett had learned to respect the efficiency of these mountain fighters.

Danilo begged for the privilege of firing the rocket, and the rest of the party watched it rise like a strange star in the soft

darkness, burst into short-lived glory and then fade into the blackness again.

Nothing happened. The reply should have been a blue rocket, but the night remained undisturbed. After waiting for half an hour Stephen proposed that they should go to sleep, leaving one of their number on guard against possible surprises. Again Danilo offered his services, but this time Barrett, who believed in ample sleep for the young, chose Katona with the proviso that after two hours he himself should take over the duties of a sentinel.

It was a shot which woke them, and by the time they were ready to defend themselves it was too late. They were hemmed in against a wall of rock too sheer to climb. They could not see their captors, but they heard a harsh command to raise their arms and throw down their weapons. Stephen felt the boy squirming at his side, but he dug his fingers into his shoulder to keep him quiet. Then another voice demanded light. A torch flared up and they saw that they were surrounded by a dozen German soldiers with their rifles at the ready. Katona was lying a few yards farther down the slope—unconscious or dead, Stephen could not tell.

He cursed himself for failing so ingloriously and wondered whether the red rocket had given away their position. He noticed now that the soldiers were commanded by a sergeant, while an officer, not in a German but a Serbian uniform, remained in the background watching them with evident unconcern. This seemed very strange, though of course a few regular officers had joined General Neditch, that unfortunate and ill-advised Serbian quisling. How did it happen? He knew that Katona was an old campaigner, alert and cautious. Why didn't he rouse them in time? Apparently he had hardly fired the warning shot when their captors were upon them. . . .

They were searched and bound with stout rope, but not gagged. Then the officer moved up to the sergeant and said something in a low voice. The sergeant nodded and turned to the prisoners.

"You'd better march quick if you want to live!" he rasped. "Not that it will make much difference in the end," he added.

Barrett, while he fell in line, was still trying to puzzle out the whole thing. What was a Serbian officer doing among the Germans? And, for that matter, what were the Germans doing here when, according to Colonel Michailovitch's agents, they had no garrison between Kragujevac and Novi Bazar?

It was still dark, but in half an hour the short night would end. If they made an attempt to escape it would have to be tried in the remaining thirty minutes of darkness. Barrett was marching between Eve and Paddy. He began to feel with his boot the road. It was hard-packed earth, with stones here and there. By striking his sole against the stones he might be able to spell out a message in Morse. The soldiers marched on both sides so it would be no use trying to speak, even in the lowest voice. Hopefully he began it, but he never got beyond the first Morse letter.

Before he could go any farther, he received a violent blow on the shoulder and the sergeant roared at him:

"Walk straight, you fool! Don't try to stumble! Can't you keep your feet on the road?"

Barrett shrugged. He must try something else. If only time were not so desperately short! His eyes had become used to the darkness now. They were walking through an open space before reaching the edge of a wood. Here the German soldiers pressed even closer; he could feel the man on his left grunting when a sapling struck him across the face—for the path was narrow, and the undergrowth dense.

Then suddenly it seemed as if the trees had changed into human beings and hell had broken loose. Heavy bodies dropped from above. A voice shouted in Serbian:

"Friends, lie on your faces! We are here to help you!"

There was nothing else to do except to obey. Barrett smelled the wet soil covered with pine needles as he stretched himself on the ground. Around, above and in front of him invisible fighting was going on, with now and then the flash of a gun or the whistle of a bullet. Behind himself he felt Paddy gripping his ankles and muttering choice Irish curses. He stretched out his arm and got hold of Eve's shapely feet, which had somehow been stripped of her "sensible" walking shoes. He heard the German sergeant's voice shouting commands until

it suddenly trailed off in a choked gurgle. The fight was short; it could not have lasted more than five minutes, and then the voice called out again in Serbian:

"You can get up now! Sorry for the inconvenience!"

Don't mention it, brother, thought Stephen, and smiled wryly. This had been a narrow escape. He hoped no one was hurt of their party . . . that all of them were alive. He did not know whether Katona was with them or had been left for dead on the mountain slope. He did not know . . .

Then torches flamed up around them and he saw that five of the German soldiers were lying motionless among the bushes, and there were two more rigid bodies across the road. To his relief, Danilo and Count Martin were standing under the same tree, while closer to him Eve and Paddy were just getting up and trying to get rid of the mud and dust which covered them.

In the background about twenty men were engaged in trussing up the remaining Germans and the Serbian officer. The latter was talking volubly but to no effect: his arms, too, were pinioned behind his back and a halter thrown round his neck.

An old man with a fine flowing beard which had not a single white hair in it came up to Stephen.

"I am Dragutin," he said. "I am sorry if you were put to any inconvenience. But there was no other way."

"I am afraid I don't understand . . ." Barrett began, but the old man cut him short.

"Where is the sixth member of your party?"

Barrett hastened to explain about Katona, and the *chetnik* leader dispatched two of his men to find out what had happened to the Hungarian. Then, with the Germans in their midst, the whole party began to move through the woods. Light was gathering rapidly. Their bonds removed, the members of Barrett's party were massaging their wrists and discussing their miraculous escape.

When they came to the guerilla encampment, Dragutin explained that it was not so miraculous after all.

"We had a report that this German advance party was in our district," he explained, after he had fed Stephen and the others on goat's milk, cheese, bread and some remarkably

good black cherries. "But we didn't know exactly where they were. When I saw your signal, I sent out only my best scout and told him to watch your camp from some distance. You see, I hoped that the signal would bring the Nazis to you wherever they were and that I could get at them afterwards. Sometimes luck smiles upon an old man like myself—and so it worked."

The two *chetniks* had brought in Katona, who had a splitting headache from the crack he received when one of the Germans jumped upon him—but otherwise was none the worse for his experience, though angry and ashamed that he had failed to spot the approach of danger. Stephen assured him that everybody was bound to make mistakes sooner or later. The guerillas had a young medical student in their ranks who concocted for Katona a potion which soon ended even his headache.

It was Paddy again, with his "tabloid nose", as Barrett called it, who tried to pump the patriarch how he came to be a guerilla leader.

"I don't like the Germans," the old man said. "I could never stand them. I fought them in 1914. I fight them now. I have seven sons and four grandsons. Six of them are with me. The others may be dead or they may be fighting somewhere else. None of us like Germans. They are nasty people. Do you need any other reasons?"

Even Paddy admitted that this was quite sufficient.

"I had a daughter, too," added the patriarch reflectively.

"Is she dead?" enquired Paddy. "Or . . ."

"She would be better off dead," Dragutin said. "I knew I shouldn't have let her marry a city man. I told her straight away that he was no good. But she liked his city ways and thought she would make a fine lady. Now she will be soon a widow."

"But . . . how do you know?" asked Barrett, startled.

Instead of a reply the old man rose and led them to another clearing where the prisoners were guarded by a dozen husky mountaineers.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Stephen.

"The Germans we keep," Dragutin answered. "They'll

come in useful if any of us are captured—though the Nazis don't care what happens to their soldiers if they fall into our hands. They think they can kill all the Serbs! As if eighty million Germans would be enough to exterminate us! Even eight hundred would be too few."

"And the officer?" enquired Paddy. "What about him?"

"Oh, we are going to hang him," the patriarch declared without any rancour or regret in his voice. "That was the reason, you see, when I said that my daughter would soon be a widow. He is my son-in-law."

"Yes, but . . ."

Dragutin suddenly became very serious.

"Listen. Perhaps the dirtiest thing the Germans ever did was to make Serbs fight Serbs. I don't speak of Ante Pavelitch—he has always been a gangster and a gangster he will remain to the end of his miserable life, which will be on the gallows. But the Nazis came and told Neditch: 'If your men don't want to starve, they must fight the *chetniks* for us.' And in every country there are men who see their children's bones growing weak and the flesh shrinking on them, and listen to their wives' weeping. They say: 'The little ones must eat. I cannot stand the tears of the women.' And they sell their souls for a crust of bread. I can understand the Serbian soldiers who fight against us. There are not many and their hearts are not in the fight. But I'll never understand and forgive the men who are their officers. For they sold their souls for money and comfort, not for a crust of bread. And that is why we are going to hang my son-in-law. . . ."

They did. His death was neither dignified nor slow, for he pleaded and wailed and clawed at the rope around his neck. But in the end he was dead. Old Dragutin spoke his epitaph:

"I always told my daughter he was no good. . . ."

The German soldiers watched the execution with panic on their faces. Perhaps for the first time they realized that others could handle the hangman's rope just as efficiently as the Gestapo did.

Old Dragutin gave some sound advice to Barrett, and for

the next three days they had no unpleasant encounters or difficulties. In these three days they met two more guerilla leaders who both seemed to be efficient fellows, though the first had only one eye and the second was rather fat for the strenuous life he was leading. All promised to be present at Cetinje in August if "nothing unforeseen happened". As they had only an army of occupation, the spectre of starvation and the might of Neditch's hirelings against themselves, they seemed to be reasonably optimistic.

A few miles beyond Prijepolje they left the secondary road along which they had been travelling and struck out into the wilderness of mountains which was hardly marked by trails. Danilo was most self-assured about the general direction of their travels, and Barrett, who checked him by a little private plotting, was amazed at the certainty with which the youngster chose the shortest and least arduous route towards their distant goal.

On the fourth day, late in the afternoon, they were walking in a deep ravine under the shadow of the towering Stol. Almost the whole morning they had followed the course of a wild mountain stream which played hide-and-seek, now vanishing in subterranean channels, now emerging again under the sky. They were tired but happy; three or four more days would see them through. Danilo was chattering all the time, retailing local legends, mostly about the stream which was supposed to travel miles and miles underground where fabulous caves and passages were said to be glittering with silver and gold even if no one had ever found these treasures. Only Barrett and Katona were listening to him; for Eve and Count Martin were walking, lost in a private world of their own into which no stranger could penetrate, while Paddy was nursing a blistered heel, trying to devise various ways of walking which looked highly original but must have been extremely painful.

The path narrowed until it was just three or four feet wide between the towering walls of rock and the rushing stream, fed even at the height of summer by the snows of the highest peaks. A few hundred yards ahead it was vanishing again in a black tunnel with a swirl of white foam and a dozen small whirlpools around the rocks sticking from its bed. Now they

reached a cleft in the cliffs on the left, and Paddy's warning shout made them look up. There, crouching behind the boulders, were a few German soldiers. They had scarcely noticed the walking party when they opened fire. Stephen's and Katona's guns replied immediately, while at the same time they all jumped for cover. Yet they were at a disadvantage by being at a much lower level than their enemies, and Barrett gave the command to try and run for it. Paddy forgot about his heel and they all made good time on the narrow, rocky path when Danilo cried out suddenly:

"Look, they are coming!"

The path dipped here and they saw, only a short distance below, another group of soldiers marching straight at them. Probably they had not yet seen where Stephen and the others were hiding, but the firing must have warned them that something was happening just above them.

"A nice kettle of fish," murmured Paddy while he slipped a new clip into his gun.

"We might try rushing them," proposed Katona.

But Barrett was staring at the stream. It seemed to be a desperate chance . . . yet perhaps it was the only one.

"Can you swim?" he asked.

He felt a little bit relieved when all answered in the affirmative.

"Try to keep your rucksacks dry," he advised them.

"And stick close together. . . ."

The next moment he had covered the distance from the boulder behind which he had been crouching to the edge of the stream and plunged in. Only a hundred yards ahead the dark entrance of the cave or tunnel was yawning. He swam a few strokes and then tried for the bottom, discovering to his relief that he could wade. Behind him the others were struggling valiantly with the strong current. He saw Danilo glide forward like a fish in its native element, and the others were also keeping up their end. He shouted to them that they could wade if they wanted. All the time the gunfire was never slackening, though a bend in the river-bed gave them now a certain amount of cover. They were increasing the distance between themselves and the party on the cliff—but they were

drawing closer and closer to the soldiers on the other side. The question was whether they would reach the tunnel before they caught up with the fugitives. . . . Barrett, who was at the head of his party, suddenly felt the bottom slipping from under his feet. He struck out desperately. The small whirlpools twirled him round and it was difficult to steer a straight course. Then a cold shadow fell upon his head, and glancing up he saw that he was straight under the overhanging lip of the cave's entrance. He ducked instinctively and then darkness swallowed him. The water was very cold and the suction irresistible. He could do nothing except drift and try to keep his head above water. Then he was thrown against the low roof of the underground passage. The pain stunned him for a second, he reached out, clutched a piece of rock, held on to it and felt before he lost consciousness that strong hands were gripping his shoulders. Then darkness became double and he slipped into a faint.

When he opened his eyes again he was lying on a narrow strip of wet sand. There was a dim light above his head; a few pieces of wood had been coaxed to burn on a small shelf of rock and gave out a smoky, wavering flame. He tried to sit up, and after an effort which made him wince with pain he succeeded. His first action was to count with his eyes the members of his party. All were present and nobody seemed to be hurt though they looked rather glum.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Look at Romeo!" crowed Paddy, who was engaged in peeling off his wet boots and socks. "He's sitting up and taking notice!"

Eve was combing her hair which now and then caught the light of the fire. Danilo had unpacked the contents of his rucksack and seemed to be lost in contemplation of a piece of sausage which had not improved upon immersion in cold water. Katona and Count Martin were gathering pieces of wood along the narrow strip of sand.

"We are lucky," said the young Count. "The spring thaws would have flooded this cave completely. Look, you can see the marks of water right up on the roof."

"How far are we from the entrance?" asked Stephen.

"About half a mile," replied Katona. "They are still there, waiting for us to come out. I crawled and swam as near as I could. I think they won't give up trying to catch us . . . at least not soon."

"But I tell you that there must be a way through!" cried Danilo, abandoning the sausage with evident regret. "Three times they tried it with a bottle . . . and every time the bottle was found on the other end, well beyond Mateševo . . ."

"We aren't bottles, my son," Paddy declared with dignity. "I wish though we had some. And not empty ones, either," he added.

"I don't see that we have any choice in the matter," decided Stephen. "Our friends outside may take a long time to get tired of watching this mouse-hole. If I am not mistaken, we haven't got such a great deal of food that we could sit here indefinitely. I always liked games of exploration. Let's try and see whether we can follow Danilo's bottles. . . ."

He was not too hopeful about the outcome himself, but it would have been foolish to discourage his small army by inactivity. So he continued brightly:

"We must have light, I think. Let's see whether we can collect enough bits of wood to improvise torches. Have you all got your rucksacks?"

It appeared that all of them had, though Eve's and Danilo's got a rather bad soaking. At Katona's suggestion they all discarded their boots—an idea which Paddy accepted with evident delight—and began to gather odd pieces of wood. They found quite a decent supply which the underground river had deposited when its level had been much higher, and which had had time to dry sufficiently. On making an inventory they discovered that they had three boxes of matches, two of them in Danilo's possession. Paddy and Danilo loaded their rucksacks with the wood—they could not be certain whether they would find any more farther on—and Danilo gave his dagger to Stephen, who fastened a largish chunk of resinous pine to it which gave out a slow-burning flame. They had not much food, but they were used to doing with little, and they had no need to worry about drinking water with the stream

bubbling and frothing at their feet.

They set out in Indian file, with Barrett's improvised torch spluttering in front. For a few hundred feet the narrow strip of sand continued. Then the tunnel or cave broadened and its floor became one of rocks smoothed by the age-old, patient work of water. Here and there stalactites rose from the ground. The roof was high enough to permit their passage without inconvenience.

"I hope we find the gold," remarked Danilo, who seemed to be in very high spirits.

"What gold?" enquired Paddy.

"Oh, they say there's heaps and heaps of it," explained the young boy. "Only it's enchanted gold," he added with perfect seriousness. "You can only find it when there's a new moon outside, and when you have behaved in the prescribed manner. . . ."

"Prescribed manner? That sounds a bit complicated," Paddy said. "What do you have to do?"

"I don't know," confessed Danilo, a bit deflated. "But there are very strict rules about it. . . ."

The underground passage began to narrow once more. The river chattered angrily, raging at the constraint of closer quarters. The banks were steeper and a greater height above the water. Now they had to bend in order not to hit their heads against the roof.

"Let's try wading," proposed Paddy who, being the tallest, was the worst encumbered by this.

He clambered down the sloping side of rock and lowered himself gingerly into the water. It only reached to his middle, and the others followed suit, keeping their bundles above their heads. Then suddenly the passage became quite narrow, until it seemed to end in a blank wall of rock with only a small hole through which the water was sucked with an angry roar.

"Here is the spot where we all turn into bottles," said Paddy, after they had all in turn examined the wall. "What do we do now?"

"We eat," decided Stephen. They were all tired a bit, and he thought that they had better have a rest and some food

before they attempted to solve the problem—if it could be solved.

They made a frugal meal out of part of their meagre supplies. Then they waded back for a few hundred yards until they found a strip of sand again where they could stretch out and rest. Katona discovered another small shelf of rock on which he built a slow-burning fire. They were too tired to set a guard . . . but it was unlikely that they should be surprised by a sudden attack. Soon they were all asleep.

“ Now, have you got it? ” asked Stephen. “ If I give one tug it means I want more slack. If I pull twice, haul me back as quickly as you can.”

He was standing, stripped to his skin, in the water. Around his middle they had fastened the only rope they had lengthened by everything they could contribute: belts, braces, and the leather straps of the haversacks. Barrett knew that he was a strong swimmer, but he also knew that the wall in front of them might be of any thickness and that he might never get through. Still, it was perhaps the only chance, unless they wanted to turn back. There had been a slight dispute as to who should try to swim through the narrow tunnel. Danilo maintained stoutly that he could get through wherever a bottle could, but in the end Barrett decided that he would not let him risk his life. He thought less of his own danger.

He plunged into the icy water, and at once felt a million tiny mouths sucking at his body. The stream filled the hole completely and it was pitch dark around him. He swam with long strokes, taking care not to hit his feet or arms against the rock. He gave one tug to the rope and instantly felt more slack being given. Every yard he progressed seemed like an infinite distance. His lungs were bursting, his pulse hammering on his temple . . . but he went on. Then, as he thought that he was at the end of his tether and prepared to give the signal to be hauled back, he felt a lessening of the darkness. With a last effort he thrust his head upwards and took a long breath of blessed air. . . . He could see only little, but he tried to find a footing and discovered that he could stand. He stretched his arms upwards and they encountered no roof.

Trying hard to keep his precarious hold on the slippery rocks, he explored the river-bed to the left and the right. It was broader here than it ever had been before, and therefore its flow was calmer, slower.

He rested for a few minutes before he gave the signal. He was hauled back quickly, though this time holding his breath meant even greater agony. Then he was standing among the others and gasped:

"We can get through . . . but you must be careful . . . it's rather a long swim. . . ."

"Wouldn't it be better," proposed Katona, "if one of us went back and the rest could follow along the rope?"

This seemed to be a sensible idea, and after regaining his breath Barrett undertook the perilous journey for the third time. Then all their equipment followed, wrapped up as tightly as they could to keep it from getting soaked. The first to join Stephen was Danilo, and one by one the rest of the company made the trip. They had some trouble in lighting a new torch, but in its light they saw that they were in a spacious, domed cave which stretched far ahead, seemingly endless.

"Your bottles have travelled a long way," joked Paddy, but Danilo took the challenge seriously.

"Didn't I say that we could go wherever those old bottles went?"

It was difficult to tell day from night, especially as the only watch they had among themselves—Count Martin's—had become rather erratic after its many immersions in water. So they rested whenever they felt that they could not go on any more and shared out the dwindling food in infinitesimal portions. Slowly all their thoughts centred around the all-important problem whether they would get through—and how long it would take. The underground stream and its bed twisted and turned, now the cave narrowed, now it grew more spacious; once Barrett had to repeat his feat of underground swimming, though this time the passage was much shorter. The outside world became dim, unreal; they could hardly imagine that there were regions where the sun shone on green grass and flowers. Once they struck a very bad patch of ground which must have been quicksand, though Katona, an

expert, swore that he had never heard of quicksand in an underground cave. Once they came to a place where the stream broadened to a veritable lake, but luckily there was space along its shores to skirt it as they would have found it difficult to cross otherwise.

And then, without warning or any previous sign, Danilo, scouting well ahead of the others as usual, began to shout and dance.

"Look! Look!" he cried, and pointed upwards.

High above the hurrying stream, unconcerned in its errand with the foolish beginnings of humans, a broad bundle of light was thrust into the darkness. Like the *fascies* of the Roman legions, the rays were compact and unbroken. They all began to run, raising their arms and shouting. Thus the men surviving the reign of glaciers must have greeted the first pale return of the sun. And the stream chattered and scolded them while, from the outside, they heard faintly the song of the birds and the sigh of the wind.

Rijeka is a sleepy little town about ten miles downhill from Cetinje. It is surrounded by dense forests mirrored in a river, and not far from it the Lake of Scutari offers an even larger mirror to the mountains and the sky.

The Italians in Rijeka were angry and bewildered. They had expected to have an easy time and to find full understanding among the Montenegrins. After all, their own queen was a daughter of Good King Nicholas—surely these hardy mountaineers would receive them with cries of joy and hasten to put all their possessions at the disposal of their liberators!

But the Montenegrins had apparently forgotten about Good King Nicholas, who had married off his daughters so astutely and feathered his own nest so amply. They did not seem to care about the kindly plans Mussolini had prepared for their benefit. Instead of opening their houses and killing the fatted calf, they drove off all their cattle into the mountains, bundled off their remarkably handsome womenfolk to safety, and dug up their rifles from their rocky gardens. True, a few of them remained behind in Cetinje, but they seemed to be all beggars and the Italians had to feed them instead of getting provisions

for themselves. It was bad enough in Cetinje, but it was even worse in Rijeka, a smaller place and less easy to garrison. Whenever an Italian soldier or officer, trusting the brotherly feelings of the Montenegrins, ventured alone outside the limits of the town, he disappeared with remarkable promptitude. These, of course, were isolated incidents, and the magnanimous Italians still thought that loving-kindness would bring the Montenegrins to see reason.

If any of them had been able to attend the discussions between Stephen Barrett and Father Sava in the forest above Rijeka, they would have been swiftly freed from these illusions. They might have even started to realize that they were not exactly welcome guests in the land of the Black Mountain. But not a single Italian was present and therefore their illusions lasted a little longer—though not too long.

It was Danilo who boldly swaggered into Cetinje, where no one took the slightest notice of him. He had discarded his weapons, though not without some strong persuasion on Stephen's part, and looked an undersized, insignificant Montenegrin boy who could not and would not harm a fly. He slouched through the streets of the capital of this strange and proud country, paused in front of Princess Zorka's palace, now occupied by the Italian officers' mess, lounged against the wall of the big bare-looking villa which King Nicholas built for himself and which all the Montenegrins simply called "Billiards" because it had contained at one time the only billiard-room in the country. He spent a long time wandering among the pine-shingled, simple houses until the shadows lengthened and night came, abruptly like always among these forbidding mountains. Then he made his way leisurely to the monastery on the edge of the town and asked for Father Sava.

And so Father Sava came to Rijeka, discoursing all the way gravely with Danilo on the habits of mules. Danilo knew very little about these stubborn animals and Father Sava a great deal, so the conversation was rather one-sided. But when they reached the forest above Rijeka, Father Sava forgot about the mules.

"But this is terrible!" he cried upon being introduced to

the members of the Ragged Guard. "If my men see you in this state they will shoot you on sight! You must get some decent clothes—at once!"

They certainly looked queer, this company of adventurers, with their sodden, torn clothes. Even Eve resembled a rather attractive ragamuffin. So before he was willing to talk, Father Sava held a whispered consultation with Danilo who, having also lost his rainbow glory, nodded with a shining face and hurried away on a mysterious errand. He returned in half an hour with three Montenegrin ladies who were laden with clothes and food. The same mountain folk who had not a crumb to spare for their Italian "benefactors" produced quite a feast for the hungry members of the Ragged Guard. And after the meal they spent some time in choosing the most becoming garments. From the small skull-caps to the rope-soled stout shoes they were transformed into well-dressed Montenegrin gentlemen—except for Eve, who looked enchanting in her richly braided and ornamented costume with its little black bodice beautifully embroidered, and the gold-trimmed headband. At first Father Sava thought that she had no place in the deliberations of men, but Count Martin persuaded him tactfully that she deserved full voice in their council and so he graciously permitted her to stay.

"Now we can talk," Father Sava said, stroking his fine full beard which was almost a twin of old Dragutin's. "What is the message you have brought from our brother Draza?"

Barrett, with a little help from Katona and Danilo, gave the gist of Colonel Michailovitch's instructions. He had picked up Serbian remarkably quickly, but he needed prompting when it came to the more complicated parts. The priest listened to him quietly, but when he ended with the injunction not to start any large-scale action in Cetinje until all the striking forces were ready in the different parts of the country, he shook his head.

"It's too late," he said briefly.

"Too late?" repeated Stephen, a little surprised. "But nothing has happened yet. . . ."

"No, but it's going to happen to-night. You see, the Italians decided that we might like one of their dukes for a

king. They have called a meeting for this evening at Cetinje, where they are going to tell us all about this wonderful new king. The meeting will be well attended. But I don't think the Italians will like the response to their kind offer."

"But Colonel Michailovitch . . ."

"It is too late," reiterated Father Sava firmly. "If I had known a week ago I might have stopped the thing. Now I couldn't even if I wanted to. And I don't want particularly to spare our kind Italian friends to-night's surprise."

There was no prospect of making him change his mind, and Barrett realized that the best thing to do about a Montenegrin was to let him make his own plans and carry them out in his own effective way. He only asked one favour:

"My friends and I . . . could we join you to-night?" he asked. "We wouldn't like to miss the fun."

"I would have been deeply hurt if you had not made this request," Father Sava replied with a twinkle in his fine brown eyes. "But of course the lady will stay with the good sisters in the convent. To-night might be rather noisy and we don't want her to be alarmed."

Eve protested, but this time the priest would not yield, and so, after imploring her husband "to be careful", she reluctantly left with the Montenegrin women who had brought the clothes.

"Now this is what we plan to do," began Father Sava the moment she had vanished among the trees. Apparently there were things which he would not trust to women's ears—even if they were as small and rosy as Eve Kalnoki's.

The Italian commander was pleasantly surprised at the response he received to the posters and oral proclamations which summoned the population of Cetinje and the surrounding district to the main square of the city where, they were promised, an "important announcement" would be made about the future of their country. Signor Fanciulli, the Commissioner of the Fascist Party, who had been sent from Rome to look after the "political reorganization" of Montenegro, was as pleased as a cat after a fish supper.

"I told you, *Commandante*," he smiled, "that these people

were sensible. They will co-operate willingly. It only needs the human touch."

The "human touch" in his case consisted of the distribution of some cheap medals and a gross of black shirts to rather carelessly selected Cetinje notabilities. No one ever knew what happened to the black shirts though some ribald suggestions were later offered, but the medals were in evidence in the Cetinje streets for days. They made admirable buckles for the broad belts which the local dandies sported. It was pure oversight that the head of the diminutive husband of the Montenegrin princess, King Victor Emanuel, was invariably turned upside down on these medals as worn by the natives. They certainly meant no disrespect—they just knew no better, poor savages.

Signor Fanciulli declared that he did not want a strong guard in the main square when he delivered his momentous speech. He had had it translated into the local dialect by a Cetinje schoolmaster who seemed to be very enthusiastic about it, for he smiled broadly when he finished his work. The Commissioner had typed it out and carefully learnt the correct pronunciation of the queerly accented words. He told the *Commandante* that it would show mistrust of these simple people if he were to appear in the midst of a numerous escort. But he did not protest against the two machine-guns which were placed above the balcony on the flat roof. After all, a man was entitled to reasonable precautions.

Stephen Barrett and his friends merged with the crowd in the square. There was nothing to distinguish them from the others; they even imitated the swagger of the Montenegrins to perfection. The soldiers—hardly more than a platoon or two—formed a cordon round the square against which the native population pressed in closely packed ranks. Then the buglers appeared and played a fanfare.

"Now watch Lohengrin," whispered Paddy into Barrett's ear. And truly, there was something operatic about the whole scene; the naked bulb burning above Signor Fanciulli's head, the dark blue sky and the back-drop of the naked mountains; the soldiers, one might have expected, would burst into song any moment.

Then Signor Fanciulli raised his right arm in the Fascist salute. The Montenegrins next to the soldiers forming the cordon followed his example enthusiastically. The fact that at the same time they patted the heads of the soldiers with exactly the same gesture was probably due to mere exuberance.

"Brother Montenegrins!" Fanciulli started. The silence was complete; a most attentive audience. Nor was the silence broken while the Fascist politician delivered his long harangue in a language of which Barrett could understand but little. But when he glanced around he saw that every single Montenegrin face wore a blissful, wide grin. Suddenly a man near him broke into a guffaw, instantly suppressed.

"What is it?" he asked Danilo, who was standing near him. "Why are they all so amused?"

"You would be, too," the youngster replied, "if you could understand him. Three times in the last five minutes he has called Mussolini a son of a pig. He said even worse things about Hitler, but I don't even know the English words for it. . . ."

Apparently the Cetinje schoolmaster who had prepared so willingly the translation for the Fascist potentate was a man with a strong sense of humour. It was quite an experience to watch the serious, dignified Montenegrins fighting against the urge of laughter. Most of them managed to keep a straight face until the end of the speech. When it came it was received with a storm of acclamation, cheers and clapping. As a matter of fact it was what Continental newspapers loved to call "*seemingly endless applause*" when they referred to the parliamentary speeches of their respective Prime Ministers. The applause would not end. Three times Signor Fanciulli raised his arm to ask for silence. Three times he opened his mouth but nothing could be heard. And then the applause became even stronger. It drowned the cries of the Italian soldiers round whose necks sturdy Montenegrins put their arms, squeezing them until they went limp. It covered the shouts of the machine-gun crews on whose heads agile men had dropped with startling suddenness.

The Montenegrins had come into the square to all appearances unarmed. The first act of the Italians was to demand

the surrender of all arms and though, apart from a few shot-guns dating from the flintlock era, little was given up, this was explained most convincingly by one of the Cetinje notables, who said that Montenegrins were very hot-blooded and that the Yugoslav Government had therefore completely disarmed them years ago. Signor Fanciulli accepted this pious lie without any scepticism, and used it as a pretext for a long denunciation of the tyrannical Serbs who denied the Montenegrins the use of their traditional weapons. He promised solemnly that "once the situation became settled", he would personally advocate the return of these arms to them—or if not actually the arms, at least some symbolical substitute. . . .

Father Sava had organized the little tragi-comedy with great efficiency. At the same time when the soldiers in the square were rendered helpless, strong groups of sturdy mountaineers surrounded the Italian barracks in and near Cetinje, disarmed the outposts and took over the arms dump Mussolini's brave boys had established in King Nicholas' former palace. All this took less than an hour, and everything was "taken care of". That is everything except the *Commandante*, his staff, Signor Fanciulli and about fifty soldiers who had barricaded themselves in Princess Zorka's villa and refused to come out.

Father Sava prevented his headstrong men from battering the villa down and causing unnecessary destruction of property. A long and highly ludicrous negotiation commenced. Signor Fanciulli, deeply hurt at the treachery of his "Montenegrin brothers", insisted that the *Commandante* and his men should resist unto death. The *Commandante*, being a soldier, knew that such resistance was foolish. The discussions were conducted as a duet on one side and as a paternal monologue on the other. Whenever the *Commandante* was on the point of agreeing to Father Sava's gentle demands, Signor Fanciulli denounced him at the top of his voice. Whenever the Political Commissioner screamed defiance, the *Commandante* hastened to intervene with a conciliatory remark. In the end the "garrison" of the villa filed out rather sheepishly. Signor Fanciulli remained inside while the others laid down their arms. He insisted that he would not surrender. Finally four

of Father Sava's men went into the house, hoisted him like a piece of furniture on their shoulders and removed him to the square.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Stephen of Father Sava, who was directing the disposal of the ammunition and small arms which his forces had collected. Unfortunately the Italians possessed few field-pieces and no tanks.

"I am sending them away," the old priest said, not without regret in his voice.

"You mean you are setting them free?"

The priest nodded.

"We can't feed them. The only other way would be to shoot them, but that might be too messy and take up too much time. I prefer to kill Italians when they have got something with which to shoot back."

And so a long, ragged line of the "conquerors" started downhill towards Kotor. It would be quite a long trek, and before they reached the sea they would be very thirsty. Signor Fanciulli was still in a rhetorical mood. He threatened dire reprisals, but not even his own people listened to him.

The total casualties in these "extensive operations" were five Italians killed and one Montenegrin wounded. But they all knew that this was only the beginning.

The Italians came back, but this time they found not even beggars to welcome them—and they certainly found no food. They sent out ineffective patrols which were cut up again and again; in the end they contented themselves with holding Cetinje and Rijeka. Even then their hold was precarious, for they had to supply their troops from the Dalmatian coast, and unless the guards were very heavy these supply columns were attacked and their load disappeared. Hitler demanded Italian troops for his Ukraine offensive; Mussolini had to garrison Greece and Albania, not to speak of the men needed to oppose the British in Africa. The Axis decided that Montenegro could wait. They would deal with her stubborn men and women after they had settled the small matter of the U.S.S.R. and the British Empire. The Germans would be in Moscow by September, at the Urals before winter came. A

few months counted little—and in the meantime the Montenegrins might see reason and accept co-operation with the New Order.

Instead of which the Montenegrins sent off strong forces to join up with Colonel Michailovitch's army and supplied the guerillas in Dalmatia with all the arms they could spare.

And then, one August day, Draza Michailovitch came to the secluded valley of Cevo, about ten miles due north of Cetinje. A widely scattered chain of Montenegrin scouts watched over the safety of the large gathering. Himmler would have given several years of his already far too long life if he could have laid his hands on the strangest General Staff meeting ever held in military history. For here were men of all Slav nationalities and some non-Slavs, united perhaps for the first time in centuries to discuss plans against their most dangerous foe. They came from Zagreb where the gangsters of Ante Pavelitch had declared war on human decency and moral law; from the depths of Bosnia where proud Moslems refused to bow to the Italian popinjays; from the Batchka where thousands of peasants had been chased from their hard-won homesteads by the rapacious Hungarians; from the Dalmatian islands and the plains of the Dunavska. Slovenes and Croats, Herzegovinians and Montenegrins, Serbians and Dalmatians—there was not a single part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia unrepresented in the valley of Cevo.

But the Ragged Guard had sent its emissaries from all the other countries fighting the Brown Plague. There were two or three Hungarians who had realized that the only hope of salvation for their tortured land lay not in territorial aggrandizement but in willing co-operation with the Slavs. They had seen their riches plundered by the Nazis, their Prime Minister driven into suicide, their stupid and base quislings delivering their man-power into Axis slavery. Albania had its "ambassador" in a kinsman of King Zog who declared bluntly that Italy had never succeeded in breaking the spirit of his nation, and that they were only waiting for the signal to rise against the bald-headed buffoon who forced their Queen to flee with her one-day-old baby on the holy feast of Easter. Bulgarians, too, were present, survivors of Stambulinsky's far-seeing regime,

disgusted with their foxy King and even foxier Government. From Rumania the greatest peasant leader had sent his emissaries bringing a tale of war-weariness and growing sabotage, of indignation over German impudence and extortion, of waning enthusiasm for the costly reconquest of Bessarabia. Nor were the Greeks missing from the ranks of the guerilla leaders; overcoming incredible difficulties, they arrived just in time for the opening of the conference. Their story was one of starvation and despair, yet of unflinching courage and never-ending self-sacrifice. Carpatho-Ruthenia, Slovakia and Austria were also among the countries represented. Count Martin, Katona and Eve were admitted not only as important members of the Ragged Guard, but also as comrades who had proved their loyalty to the cause and their ability of working for it. Danilo begged until he was allowed to act as a sort of messenger-boy in the roomy tent which served for the conference-room. Barrett, of course, was representing Britain, and Paddy, caring little for the irregularity of a "non-belligerent" meddling in such affairs, introduced himself by saying: "I am just a token of Uncle's Sam's goodwill. Believe me, there is plenty more behind me. . . ."

Just before the conference started, Barrett had a last go at the rather primitive short-wave set which they had rigged up in a farmhouse at the northern edge of the valley. The more elaborate radio station was lost at Uzice. Almost at the last moment he picked up from London a Morse summary of the day's most important news. Morse was the only thing which got through the worst jamming, and therefore it was used to a considerable extent. The British did not bother putting it into code, for the main thing was that it should reach those who were unable to listen to the regular news bulletins.

His pencil flew across the paper. After a few minutes he stopped, tore the sheet from the pad and rushed across the valley towards the hut in which Draza Michailovitch had taken up his Spartan quarters.

The leader of the Yugoslav Army had paid high tribute to the skill and ingenuity of his envoys who had prepared the ground for this conference. When he arrived, he had sent

immediately for Stephen and the others.

"You all deserve a medal," he smiled. "But I have no medals to give away. We need our metal to forge weapons not decorations. But when this war is over and you will all come back to a free Jugoslavia, you'll find that we haven't forgotten all you did. . . ."

This was a long speech and high appreciation from the man who spoke so little and believed in action, not words. Therefore Stephen was especially happy to be the bearer of news which was certain to please even the fiercely modest Colonel.

Draza Michailovitch was sitting behind a plain kitchen table covered with maps and papers. He glanced up when Barrett entered.

"General," said the Englishman, and though he was still in his slightly musical-comedy Montenegrin clothes, he saluted smartly, "I just took down this message . . . from London. I thought you'd like to know about it . . . as soon as possible. . . ."

"General?" repeated Michailovitch, surprised, and then took the sheet of paper. He read it and blushed—blushed like a schoolgirl.

For the message flashed from the tall steel-towers of Daventry contained the latest decision of the exiled Yugoslav Government in London—promoting Colonel Draza Michailovitch to the rank of full General and including him in a re-constituted Cabinet as Minister of War.

"Comrades!"

The August sun was very hot; therefore the resourceful Montenegrins had gathered many green branches, sprinkled them liberally with water and covered the top of the tent with them. This served the double purpose of cooling the inside and acting as camouflage if an inquisitive plane should spot the unusual movements in the valley. The tent was crowded and around it hundreds of men and women were sitting in the broiling sun, patiently waiting to catch a glimpse of "Our Draza".

The conference had presented considerable linguistic difficulties. It was impossible to find a language which all dele-

gates understood equally well. So General Michailovitch was speaking in Serbian while three expert translators transposed it into Bulgarian, Greek and Hungarian, interpreting in turn the suggestions which the other representatives had to offer. But Barrett and Katona, who both had acquired now a considerable mastery of Serbian, enjoyed the clear-cut, simple eloquence of the newly gazetted General and War Minister.

"Comrades! The mere fact that we were able to gather here to-day is a pledge of our strength and a guarantee of our victory. The enemy has occupied our countries, destroyed our homes, turned us into outlaws. We have men but no arms sufficient for them. Therefore our strategy is simple. We must strike only when we have absolute confidence of our success. We must husband our resources and prepare for the time when we can descend from our mountains and sweep the Germans and Italians from our lands. There is one thing you must remember and constantly keep in your minds. We are not alone! Only a few hundred kilometres from us the mightiest military power of Europe is fighting the Nazis. The Russians may be pressed back temporarily, but they cannot be defeated. And when the time comes we will share their victory. . . . Nor must we forget the great British Empire. Though we have no immediate contact with her forces, we can count on every help she is able to give us. And behind her there is the arsenal of the free world, the United States of America. All we need is patience and tenacity. . . ."

"Would you have us then sit idly while the Germans and Italians continue their wicked work?" called out Father Sava.

"No, Sava," Michailovitch smiled, his smooth, boyish face turned towards the bearded priest. "But I expect hard-headed caution from all of us instead of foolish daring. We don't want to win battles; we want to win the war."

"What is your plan, Draza? What can we do? Where can we begin?" There were a dozen voices clamouring for guidance, a master plan.

"Begin at the weakest point of our enemy: his communications," came Michailovitch's quick reply. "Make it impossible for him to transport his troops and supplies. Blow up bridges. Destroy railway lines. Mine roads."

"We have started that," said a tall, fair-haired man. "I am from Dalmatia. But we have no more explosives left. We cannot fight with our bare hands."

"No need for that," answered the General. "We are together here to discover how strong we are and what we can do for each other. We can share or barter whatever supplies we are short of among ourselves. The main thing is that we should all work according to a plan which all of you consider the right one and which you can whole-heartedly serve. Soon the winter will be upon us and our main task will be to survive. But we must look ahead—to the spring and the summer, to coming battles and more distant prospects. We must work out a system of keeping in close touch, of co-operating in adjacent territories, of organizing our own factories and workshops. It is not our task to debate how our part of the world will be shaped after we have won the victory; nor can we waste time in raking up ancient quarrels. You are here because you want to work together. We have three days to plan how all this is going to be done; and therefore I want to start right away. The first point on the agenda is the formation of the six committees. We have . . ."

Stephen Barrett's attention wandered. He was more interested in the speaker than the details of the routine business. Michailovitch had been right when he had said that the mere fact of this gathering was almost a miracle. Germans and Italians boasted alike that they had completely subdued the Balkans—though recently they had coined a new expression for the patriot guerilla groups. Anybody who opposed Hitler was a "Communist", although in Yugoslavia and the other South Slav countries thousands were fighting the Nazis who had quite different political views. The disconcerting fact for propaganda was that all these partisans did not care in the slightest what they were called as long as they could do harm to the German war machine; nor were the farmers and workers, the lumbermen and shepherds who helped them in every conceivable way bothered by the "Red Peril" which Dr. Goebbels called up as a spectre in all these countries.

Barrett watched the tall, slim figure of the General with his straight dark hair, smooth-shaven face and shell-rimmed spec-

tacles. There was quiet authority in his voice and bearing. Truly a leader of men, he thought, and speculated idly whether, a hundred years hence, the *guzhca* would sing the mighty deeds of Draza Michailovitch. . . .

Then he was jolted back to the present when he heard his name mentioned, and discovered that he had been elected to the committee which was to discuss a perfected intelligence service for the Ragged Guard of Freedom whose leaders were defying pain and death in carrying on their fight . . .

For three days the hundred delegates conferred, snatching meals or a few hours' sleep whenever it was convenient. Stephen was amazed by their efficiency and quiet tenacity. He had always believed that Continentals and especially Slavs were dreamy fellows, loving talk for talk's sake, and leaving action to take care of itself. But the furnace of suffering had hardened these men and women; they were purposeful, impatient of delay. In those three days they achieved more than a dozen staff consultations would have done in pre-war days. They soberly weighed their chances, and if here and there a hothead burst out with some risky proposal, he was politely but firmly put in his place. And all the time the tall figure of Michailovitch slipped in and out of the committee meetings which were held in forest clearings, caves, the large tent or any other semi-private place.

At the end of the third day the delegates to this amazing military meeting dispersed as silently and unobtrusively as they had come. Some had to travel hundreds of miles through territory bristling with danger, infested with their mortal enemies—others did not know what news of disaster or triumph would receive them when they reached their units—but they parted with hardly more than a handshake and the promise to reassemble again, if not in the same place, yet under the same auspices, in six months' time.

Late that night General Michailovitch sent for Stephen and Paddy. Danilo had already said good-bye to his friends; he was joining one of the Montenegrin guerilla troops which Father Sava was directing. For the youngster it was not an easy parting because he had grown very fond of the adventurers he had

guided across the trackless mountains; and if he had not been so proud of his own manliness he would have even shed a tear or two. They all gave him a farewell gift; a knife, a belt, a compass—and he went off, hugging his new treasures proudly. Eve looked after him rather wistfully.

"I would wish my own son a different adolescence," remarked Count Martin, divining her thought.

"It is a cruel thing indeed, to be young in Hitler's Europe," assented Paddy.

"That is what we have to fight for," said Eve softly, "that our children should not grow up too early . . . that they should not learn to know horrors too cruel even for their parents. . . ."

Katona, too, said good-bye—he was planning to slip back into Hungary and prepare a closer contact between the Magyar members of the Ragged Guard and their comrades in Rumania and Slovakia. He was a marked man in his own country where the Nazis had set a price upon his head, but this circumstance did not seem to bother him. Count Martin and Eve sent messages to their friends, and Paddy asked him to get through a few words to his American editor, who by this time might have started to wonder what had happened to his roving correspondent.

When Stephen and Paddy arrived in the bare hut which served as the General's headquarters, he received them at once.

"Did you enjoy your little hike from Uzice to Cetinje?" he asked.

"It had its high spots," agreed Stephen.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," said Paddy.

"Fine," smiled Michailovitch. "Because I want to send you a-travelling once more. This time to Dalmatia."

"I always wanted to visit Dubrovnik," murmured the Irishman.

"Your task will be a double one again," continued the General. "First of all you'll have to take some explosives to our people on Korcula. They need them badly and we hadn't the sufficient quantity before their representatives left. It is due to arrive the day after to-morrow—from Bosnia. This is

the easy part of your mission. The other is rather more difficult. . . ."

He turned to Barrett.

"You know that our radio apparatus is not powerful enough to establish direct contact with London or Moscow. We must have one capable of this as soon as possible. There have been three such stations in Yugoslavia; two have been destroyed, the third is heavily guarded by the Germans and it would be suicide to try and occupy it—not to speak of transporting the apparatus to our headquarters. But there is a place less well garrisoned and more open to a surprise attack. It is on Lagosta, not far from Korcula. Our technicians will tell you what we need most—for of course you won't be able to bring away everything. The rest I leave to you and your friends. Good luck! "

He shook hands with Paddy and Barrett; the next moment he was immersed in a thick bundle of reports which his aide-de-camp put in front of him. The two friends found themselves outside the hut, staring at each other in the darkness.

"And are we expected to capture that darned island single-handed?" growled Paddy. "Or are the Mussolini boys going to succumb to Eve's charm and let us walk away with the swag?"

"It certainly sounds like a tough proposition," agreed Stephen. "But here we go again—more scoops for you, news-hawk. . . ."

"Yeah, and you can write my obituary," rumbled the Irishman. "Still, anything for a little variety."

Count Martin insisted that he should be permitted to join them; and wild horses would not have kept Eve away when her young husband was starting on a dangerous mission. She explained artlessly that she would in any case follow them whether they wanted it or not, and that she preferred to travel in their company, however helpless males they were.

A Serbian officer of the signal corps gave Stephen an admirably precise description of Lagosta radio station which was built on a hill and boasted of the most modern equipment.

"We only want the transmitter," he said. "Our receiving

apparatus is quite adequate. Of course if you could bring along a few dozen valves, that would be excellent," he added wistfully. "And we have run short of condensators. The batteries . . ."

"Hold on, hold on!" cried Stephen. "We cannot carry off the whole island. But we'll try to do our best. Give me a sketch of the map and any other useful details which come to your mind. But don't hope for too much—we'll be lucky if we can get away with the transmitter, I think."

"Oh, you can easily fool the Italians," the engineer declared blithely.

They were supplied with arms and money; they exchanged their picturesque Montenegrin clothes for nondescript Western garb which would be less conspicuous along the coast. Then, early in the morning, three days after the staff conference had ended, they set forth on another mountain journey.

It was impossible to choose the obvious route: down the winding motor road to Budva or the other highway which led to Kotor. Both were patrolled constantly by the Italians, whose Montenegrin garrison would have been completely cut off if anything happened to these vital supply lines.

"My, these mountains are fierce," sighed Paddy when their guide, a gnarled old shepherd, pointed out the scarcely discernible track which led from crag to crag, along crazy precipices, now dipping into deep ravines, now climbing to the bare mountain-tops. Standing above Cevo, they could follow it for a long way with their eyes until it was lost behind a high ridge.

The only thing they had retained of their Montenegrin outfit were the rope-soled shoes, and these proved now a blessing, for their grip was strong enough to make almost vertical climbing endurable. From Cevo to Ubli, from Ubli to Grahovo, thence to Lastva, avoiding Trebinje to reach Hum and hit the coast somewhere near Ston, which was at the narrowest point of the Peljesac peninsula . . . it was a long and weary trek in the fierce August heat. The old shepherd seemed to be immune to fatigue or thirst; though his decrepit body looked frail enough, he thought nothing of ten hours' travel a day. The nights they spent in the open, often shivering in the

sudden mountain storms which whipped the rain across the high plateaux. A steamer or a car would have taken them in half a day to their destination; the trip across the mountains took four and a half. But on the fifth day, late in the heat-shimmering afternoon, the guide stopped on the top of the cliff and pointed downwards:

“Ston. Beyond the water. Straight down.”

Thereupon he inclined his head graciously and turned on his heels. Apparently he intended to start immediately on the four-and-a-half-day trip back to Cevo. Stephen stopped him and asked for more specific instructions, which were rather grudgingly given. They were to avoid Oslje, which might be held by the Italians. Yes, there were foreign soldiers all along the peninsula. But if they waited on the shore until nightfall, they would find a fisherman to take them across the narrow channel to Luka, and Ston was only five kilometres from there. Mirko Radovan was the man they had to ask for at Ston. He would tell them the rest.

The old man would not say more, and Stephen saw that it was useless to press him. He would have certainly gone without giving them this vital information if he had not been asked about it. Apparently he thought these foreigners queer folk; it could not be helped if they meddled with the affairs of Yugoslavia, but they should not be unduly encouraged.

They thanked him and then watched his diminishing figure along the ridge.

“I move that we take a nap,” said Paddy, and the next moment he was stretched out in the shadow. The others followed suit. They did not wake until the sun was dipping on the horizon, and then they had to hurry to take advantage of the failing light while they clambered down towards the sea.

Between Oslje and the seashore they almost ran into an Italian patrol, but as the happy warriors were roaring *Giovinezza* at the top of their voices, it was not too difficult to avoid them. But they found no boats on the shore, and as the channel was narrow enough for a comfortable swim, they risked the unknown currents and landed without much difficulty a little below Luka.

They had to climb again to get to Ston, but it was cool and pleasant, and they were too tired to feel their own exhaustion. Ston was darkened and deserted, not even a dog barked when they cautiously turned into the main street. They were travelling light as regards their own personal possessions—a haversack apiece—but each of the men carried a rucksack weighing twenty-five pounds. This might have seemed a light enough load to the average “footslogger”—but as the twenty-five pounds were made up of twenty-five sticks of dynamite, it was a ticklish cargo to handle. Once or twice when they climbed tracks which, according to Paddy, any self-respecting mountain goat would have refused to tread, these rucksacks felt about ten times as heavy as they were in reality. Count Martin refused Eve to take her share in this part of the expedition, saying that he preferred her all in one piece; and their four-and-a-half-day Odyssey was made rather grim by the possibility that at any moment they might be blown into eternity. The achievement of having brought the dynamite so far meant an immense relief; and Barrett reflected that they would be all a great deal happier when Mirko Radovan would take delivery of this unusual consignment.

Mirko Radovan was a tall, handsome Dalmatian, looking rather like a retired sea-captain which he easily might have been. When they found his modest villa at last, he was most solicitous in his welcome. But when Barrett explained about the rucksacks, their host showed no eagerness to take charge of them. He said that he had never handled explosives in his life, and would they mind placing the dynamite in the cellar, a good hundred yards from the house, hollowed out of the living rock.

“Our friends on Korcula will fetch it to-morrow,” he said. “At the same time they can take you across and make the preparations for your further trip.”

That meant spending twenty-four hours under the Radovan roof, and the adventurers had no objection to a little rest. Radovan told them that Ston itself was free of Italians, but that they were in some force at Orebic and Viganj, nearer Korcula.

“They have been very quiet recently,” he said. “Appar-

ently there is some quarrel between Ante Pavelitch and Mussolini about this stretch of the coast; both the Italians and the Croats claim title to it, and so neither of them take too much trouble about *us*, to whom it really belongs."

"And what are you doing about it?" asked Paddy, always the reporter.

The tall Dalmatian smiled.

"We do our bit," he said. "We have sunk five Italian cargo boats in the Mljetski Channel—stole some of their mines to send their own ships to the bottom. They never dreamt of sweeping the channel—because they had never mined it themselves. Farther south, between Budva and Ulcinj, several of their land convoys were cut to pieces. Then they brought up some destroyers and shelled Budva, Petrovac, Misis—but most of the places were empty; our people had gone up into the mountains. When the Italians returned to their bases after their 'glorious victories', we came back to our homes and the whole thing started right from the beginning. The Italians are getting tired of it, but they have few ships or men to spare. . . ."

He added dreamily:

"Just wait till next spring . . . when we'll have the arms and the drilled men. Once we get into Albania, the Italians will be in hot water. And the Germans won't feel so good either. . . ."

The door swung open and a big sheep-dog—a queer cross between a Dalmatian and a spaniel—padded into the room. And when Stephen Barrett happened to glance at the canine visitor, he didn't feel so good either. For the dog was carrying something in his mouth—something which at first Stephen's brain refused to recognize as a stick of dynamite . . . but in the end he had to accept the evidence of his eyes. Stealthily he glanced around to see whether his companions had noticed anything. But Paddy was listening to their host with absorbed attention; while Eve and Count Martin were again wrapped up in the special world of young lovers.

But now Eve looked up and saw the dog. While Barrett speculated wildly how the friendly animal might have got hold of the dynamite, she pursed her lips and whistled.

For a second of unbearable tension it looked as if the dog were to drop his booty and make for Eve's invitingly crooked fingers—then it shook itself and padded towards the open fireplace in which, despite the high summer, a friendly fire was burning. Barrett caught his breath. Dynamite and an open fire—in a minute or so they might all be blown sky-high . . . perhaps earlier if the dog dropped the stick. . . .

And then he saw Eve rise, quietly and quickly, cross the few yards separating her from the shaggy dog, kneel down and extract gently the dynamite from his jaw. It growled a little, more playfully than in anger, but it suffered without protest being robbed of its toy. Then Eve straightened slowly, with infinite caution.

"What's his name?" she asked Radovan.

"Zdravo," answered the doughty Dalmatian. "A very good watchdog. He can smell any Italian or German a mile away. . . ."

Eve was keeping her hands behind her back. She was a little pale, but perfectly composed. In the same moment as if wishing to prove his master's words, Zdravo gave tongue. He growled and barked, his jaws snapped angrily and his whole body quivered.

"Up with you!" Radovan whispered. "It must be a patrol, damn it. I never knew them to come so late in the evening!"

He pointed to the stone staircase leading to the upper floor, and they silently filed upstairs while Zdravo was giving a realistic imitation of a furious dog preparing to do battle unto death.

Upstairs, along a stone-flagged corridor, Eve suddenly leant against her husband. Her whole body trembled.

"Here . . . take this . . ." she whispered, "be . . . very careful. . . ."

It was Barrett who took charge of the dynamite stick, for Count Martin's arms had to hold the body of his wife. Eve had fainted.

Radovan had told them to hide in the last room on the left side of the passage. It was a sort of attic, filled with old furniture, empty barrels and a few sacks of grain. Count

Martin laid down Eve gently on them and began to chafe her hands. He looked up questioningly at Stephen.

"She saved us all," the Englishman said simply. "The dog . . . it had got hold of a stick of dynamite. I suppose she couldn't stand the relief from the strain. It was about the bravest thing I ever saw a woman do."

"You mean . . ." gasped Paddy.

Barrett nodded.

"It would have been a fine end," he smiled. "After carting all this stuff across those mountains . . . getting blown up here in the hospitable home of Gospodin Radovan! Well, you have to thank Eve . . ."

The lady to whom he was referring in such flattering terms, opened her eyes, took one look at the three men bending over her and blushed furiously.

"I am a goose," she said. "I never thought I would faint in my life."

"You can faint as often as you like," her husband declared. "After this we won't think that you are just a weak woman. . . ."

They had been talking in whispers, for all the time they were keenly conscious of the loud voices below them. They were just above the kitchen and could hear the conversation clearly. There were some Italians downstairs and they were questioning Radovan about some mysterious strangers who had been seen swimming across from the mainland.

"It would have been better, after all, to wait for a boat," murmured Stephen. "Apparently their patrols are rather active. I wonder . . ."

But Radovan was an old hand at the game of deception. Shrewd enough to know that a sullen silence would awaken suspicion, he offered half a dozen theories as to the identity of the strangers, garrulously explained a number of different routes which they might have taken. He talked so much and was so confusing that he established the character of a fool perfectly. The Italians tried to stop him, but soon gave up the attempt. In ten minutes they were gone and the four fugitives descended cautiously. The first thing Stephen did was to visit their host's cellar and remove the waterproof rucksacks with

the dynamite to a safer spot where Zdravo could not get at them.

The men from Korcula arrived the next day just before midnight. There were three of them: two sturdy fishermen and a priest who might have been Father Sava's younger brother.

"Have you brought it?" was his first avid question.

Stephen nodded.

"Where is it?" asked one of the fishermen.

Radovan explained.

"Then we'd better start back," proposed the priest.

"Wait a moment," smiled Barrett. "What are your plans? You know, I suppose, why we came here?"

"Yes, of course," the Korcula priest beamed. "To blow up the Italian barracks in our town."

"Well, not exactly," answered Stephen. "We have something less drastic and more important to do. Perhaps there has been some muddle in our communications system. I have no objection to your admirable idea about the barracks—but first we have to do something else."

He explained in a few curt sentences the importance of getting to Lagosta and "scrounging" the short-wave transmitter. The three men from Korcula listened with lengthening faces. Apparently their only concern was to get rid of the hated Italians—at least temporarily. And now these deliverers who brought them enough dynamite to blow up a hundred Italian barracks, turned out to be interested in something quite different.

"Couldn't we . . . couldn't we blow up the barracks first?" asked one of the fishermen hopefully.

"I am sorry," Stephen shook his head. "Business before pleasure. If we get the transmitter, I'll be pleased to take part in your fireworks myself . . . and so will my friends. But we simply have to do our job first. Now what do you know about Lagosta, and how can we get there and how many men are available to help us?"

The three men from Korcula knew a good deal about Lagosta, for the priest had been visiting a sister there, and

before the war the two fishermen had often disregarded the invisible frontier in the blue waters of the Canale di Lagosta when the catch was more promising beyond it. The island was practically flat, and except for Lagosta itself practically uninhabited. The radio station was outside the town, well guarded, though recently the garrison had been greatly reduced as the Italians had to send occupation troops to Korcula, Mljet, Hvar and the mainland. There was a small submarine base on the north coast, some distance from the wireless station.

"There's a new moon to-morrow evening," the priest said. "We can land as soon as it's dark. I think we'll be able to muster about fifty men. They are not very well armed, I am afraid—but they can fight. The difficulty is about the boats. The Italians have requisitioned all of them except . . ."

"Don't forget Lazar Blato, Father Milivoj," one of the fishermen interrupted.

"Oh, of course," the priest nodded. "You see," he turned to Barrett, "we have an inventor in Korcula. Lazar Blato has tried for years to work out a collapsible motor-boat which can be taken to pieces and put together in a few minutes. I think he has been quite successful, though some of his early models were rather unreliable . . ."

"The first six broke up in the middle of the sea," the fisherman grinned. "But Lazar is a very stubborn man."

Stephen sighed. If they were expected to transport fifty men, a hundredweight of dynamite and themselves in a collapsible motor-boat invented by a local genius, it promised to be quite a hectic time. But, after all, he could offer no better suggestion himself.

Just before dawn they slipped across the narrow channel which divided Korcula from the peninsula of Pelsejac. The boat in which the priest and his companions had travelled was a ramshackle and clumsy vessel, but the distance to be covered was short, and Stephen's only anxiety was about the rucksacks filled with dynamite which he guarded himself in the stern. The night was soft, luminous; there was an air of a boating-party about the whole excursion. They landed half-way between Korcula and Lumbarda where the boat was hidden

in a cove and walked the six kilometres to the town, just emerging from the morning mists like a fairy-tale castle.

They spent the rest of the day in a ruined palace opposite the Cathedral, right in the centre of the town which was full of Italian troops. Father Milivoj, who brought food and drink to them twice during the long, hot day, explained that this was a far safer place than any other in Korcula; some practical joker had gone with a tale of buried treasure to the Italians soon after they came to the island, and after they had spent weeks in fruitless excavations they got so sick of the place that they would never go near it. It was cool and pleasant under the broken arches and roofless walls. They slept, ate and talked, until in the afternoon the priest returned with a thin, dark man who had the eyes of a fanatic. This, it appeared, was Lazar the inventor. He was overjoyed to meet such distinguished foreigners, and launched forth into a long lecture on applied mechanics with special regard to ship-building, until Stephen cut him short with a question:

"Will your boat float?"

"It will fly, *gospodin!*" Lazar replied with a flash of pride.

"This time it's perfect. You see, I discovered the . . ."

"How many people will it hold?" asked Barrett.

The inventor's face fell.

"Twelve—at a pinch," he confessed.

"And we are fifty-four—not to speak of arms and ammunition," sighed Stephen. "What about the others?"

"We have two more boats—each can carry a dozen," Father Milivoj replied.

"That still leaves quite a few unaccounted for," said the Englishman. "What are they going to do? Swim?"

"They'd be rather tired by the time they got there," ventured Count Martin. "I think the shortest distance is about five miles, and that takes no account of currents. . . ."

"And wouldn't it be rather awkward," remarked Paddy, "if Gospodin Lazar's marvellous boat arrived several hours before the fishing-boats did?"

Eve had a brainwave.

"We can tow them," she said. "And as for the other men . . . what about strong tow-ropes hanging from the

boats? If Gospodin Lazar's motor-boat is such a wonderful contraption, it won't find such a task too much. . . ."

Lazar assured them that his boat could do practically everything. But Stephen still had some objections to offer.

"And what if the sea is rough?" he enquired. "We might get a *bora* and then the tow-ropes won't be very comfortable . . ."

"No, no, we never have the *bora* at this time of the year," Father Milivoj assured him firmly. "I think it is a very good idea. We will get the ropes and the other things ready. I come to fetch you as soon as it is dark."

Lazar, too, was in a hurry to get away and start putting his invention ready for a test he never hoped to be given; his house, as he explained, was right on the beach, outside the town, and there was little danger of a surprise visit from the Italians. When he and the priest were gone, Barrett sighed.

"I wish we could have made safer arrangements," he confessed to his friends. "There's too much at stake to trust a collapsible motor-boat and a few tow-ropes. . . ."

"Don't be a spoil-sport, my Casanova," Paddy teased him. "It's going to be fun."

How much fun, he could not have foretold. Also, the word was capable of many interpretations—some of them rather grim.

The moon was still on the wane; the small, even waves ran in straight lines in front of the slight breeze. They got away in darkness. Paddy, Count Martin, Eve, Stephen and Father Milivoj were in the motor-boat, with a perspiring Lazar handling the steering-wheel and now and then bending down to tinker with the powerful engine. Behind them the two fishing-boats were packed with men, and the towing-ropes cut a wide swathe in the calm water, dotted by the bobbing heads of the swimmers. Whatever faults Lazar's invention might have possessed, it was swift and comparatively silent. The fishing-boats were equipped with single square sails, but of course there was no way of using them.

The crossing took ninety minutes. All the time Stephen kept

straining his eyes for "hostile craft"; their arms consisted of a single machine-gun and some rifles; not much use against a well-armed torpedo-boat. But apparently the Italians were either asleep or busy in waters farther east; they met no one and they landed not far from the prearranged spot on an apparently deserted beach.

With tactful diplomacy Barrett had ascertained that Father Milivoj had no ambitions of generalship. He had asked the priest to explain to the men that his authority was a direct one from General Michailovitch, and that they would have to obey him implicitly. The Korcula priest promised to make this quite clear to the husky fishermen whom he had collected for the raid.

As soon as the boats grounded, Stephen detailed a dozen men to guard them—for if they lost the boats they faced certain disaster. However depleted the Lagosta garrison, it must outnumber them by ten to one, and this superiority was certain to be increased by an overwhelmingly greater strength in arms. Then, with the rest of his "troops", he set out towards the radio station. But they had hardly covered a few hundred yards when he stopped and gathered them in a compact circle around himself.

"I want three volunteers," he said. "Volunteers for danger—perhaps for death."

He had not expected it from these stolid fishermen—yet after all they were Dalmatians, the "fightingest Jugoslavs" as Paddy put it once—and every arm shot into the air.

"Only three," smiled Stephen. "As you all want to go, let Father Milivoj pick them."

The priest soon made his choice—three young lads of splendid physique and a slightly sheepish look on their faces.

"You go down to the submarine base—try to get as near as you can . . ." explained Barrett. "Take three sticks of dynamite and select the spots carefully where you place them. Don't get caught. As soon as you have lighted the fuses, start back to the boats. Don't take too much time over it—because we'll tackle the radio station only after you've created your little diversion. . . ."

"Stephen," said a voice near him in the darkness, "I want to go with them."

Barrett turned quickly.

"Paddy! What's biting you? We'd better stick all together."

"I always liked fireworks," the Irishman insisted.

"You are a fool. I won't let you . . ."

"Sure, and wouldn't you be easier in your mind if you had someone to look after those boats? See you in jail, Stephen. . . ."

He had joined the three young fishermen who were already moving towards the coast. There was no way of stopping him and Stephen shrugged. Eve, after some persuasion, had stayed with the boats, and so Count Martin was the only one of his friends at his side. Still, Paddy had a lot of common sense under that red thatch of his, and the placing of the dynamite where it could do most good without being detected by the sentries was going to be a ticklish business. . . .

Father Milivoj was walking at the head of the small, compact group of men as he knew the shortest way to the radio station. Barrett was gratified to observe that his "assault troops" could move swiftly and silently, though most of them were still dripping with water after their long swim.

Suddenly the priest stopped.

"We are just below the hill now," he whispered.

"Let's wait then, here . . . find us the best cover . . . until the others have done their job. . . ."

There were some bushes fringing the edge of the hill. In the stronger starlight, under the cloudless sky, Barrett could just discern the outlines of a tall tower with two wireless masts rising twice its height above it. The men scattered in the thickest shadows. Somewhere above them, regular, measured steps sounded—the sentries. Stephen tried to make out how many there were, but he did not succeed. Well, it would not be those outside who counted—the people inside the tower were the main obstacle. And if his little diversion did not work . . .

Minutes crawled by. He had no watch and so was robbed even of the consolation of seeing time pass. His men were

absolutely silent; he might have been all alone in the night except for the slow steps not far above him.

Cold-bloodedly he calculated the chances of seeing the dawn after this night. They were about fifty to one, he decided. The dynamiting of the submarine base might divert attention from the attack on the radio station, but it would certainly bring all the coastguards into action. It was almost a miracle that they had not been spotted when they landed—but then, perhaps the Italians were growing a little cocksure at such a safe distance from British troops. Even if they managed to overpower the guards of the radio station and remove the transmitter . . . a plane or a fast torpedo-boat could easily overtake them. Then again, Korcula was not a safe place to hide . . . Italians were all around them, and until they got once more into the friendly refuge of the mountains, they could not be sure of immunity from surprise attack, ambush or pursuit.

Not for the first time he wondered what it might be like—a peaceful life without daily excitement, with nothing more strenuous to do than catch the eight-fifteen and polish an arm-chair until five-thirty. It seemed strange and unreal—to walk down a street without planning escape or violent counter-action in case of sudden attack; to look at people without wondering what sinister designs their brains carried; to sleep without the necessity of jerking into instant alertness. . . . It might be very attractive—but it would be damned boring, he concluded.

The next moment he was on his feet. From the distance the dull reverberation came . . . followed by two enormous explosions which shook the ground. A few seconds later the night leapt into violent life above him. Commands, running feet, curses, clanking of arms. Soldiers rushed down the hill . . . some of them passed along a path only a few yards from their hiding-place. The tower seemed to vomit running men, some of them struggling to adjust rifles, buckle on ammunition belts. Two men came by, carrying a machine-gun. An officer swung a sword melodramatically.

The men around him were still silent and motionless. Apparently Father Milivoj had coached them well. Now Stephen raised his arms and a thin, ragged line of agile figures swarmed forward.

The sentries were still in their places, peering intently towards the west where a dull red glow began to spread. Stephen silently blessed Paddy; he must have laid those charges to some good effect. His men needed no orders; the sentries went down almost at the same time, as if an invisible scythe had mowed them all in a heap. The rushing line scarcely paused; two men remained behind to see that the sentries stayed silent.

The door of the tower was open. Inside an octagonal entrance hall, a marble floor, a bronze tablet on the wall with Mussolini's jutting chin and a few lines of defiant braggadocio. . . . A table with an N.C.O. behind it who looked up startled. . . . The next moment the table went crashing, but Barrett did not stop to see how Father Milivoj, his rough habit billowing, a stout stick in his hand, was faring. For behind the table there was a grille, and behind the grille another Italian sergeant was fumbling desperately with a bunch of keys. He had already slammed the grille and was trying to fit a key into the inside lock when Stephen jumped. Reaching through the narrow space between the steel lattice, he grasped the man's throat. Slowly, inexorably, he forced him down to his knees until he went limp and fell, his keys clattering on the marble.

By the time Barrett had torn open the grille, there was a clatter of feet on the narrow staircase in front of him. Three soldiers appeared, their faces distorted in amazed excitement. Shots rang out; the first soldier crumpled up, but the two behind him had whipped out guns and were firing into the thick mass of the attackers. Someone fell, groaning, just behind Stephen, and he felt a bullet grazing his own shoulder. Then two shining and sharp objects whizzed just above his head. The second soldier clutched his breast and fell. The third had dropped his gun and was staring rather stupidly at an arm transfixed by the dagger one of the fishermen had thrown with such deadly aim.

Stephen saw that the staircase was leading both downwards and upstairs. He shouted to Count Martin who was at his side, to take a few men and explore the downstairs regions while he started with Father Milivoj and the others towards the

upper floors. Just as they turned one of the spirals, there was another explosion outside which this time rattled the windows and made the earth rumble deep beneath them.

The first floor was empty and so was the second. The former apparently served as barracks for the guard; empty bunks, a cooking-stove, clothes and bed linen in disarray all pointed to this fact. The second floor, another octagonal chamber, was the cipher room, and Barrett quickly snatched up half a dozen books lying on one of the tables with the pious hope that they might contain current codes.

The third floor was barred by an iron gate. It refused to yield to their onslaught, but Barrett remembered the bunch of keys which the Italian sergeant had dropped. He sent one of his men flying downstairs, and in three minutes the gate was open. This room was not as large as the others; and when Barrett entered it he understood why the men working in front of the intricate control boards had not noticed anything of the commotion outside—for the walls were soundproof and most of the men were wearing earphones. They gave little trouble—in a short time they were lined up against the wall. Stephen had them escorted to a smaller room on the same floor, partitioned off by a brick wall, which must have been the commanding officer's. He wanted no witnesses for what he was going to do.

Behind glass he found an axe hanging on the wall. While he dispatched his whole remaining force downstairs, except three husky fellows, he made the round of the room. He found three transmitters. Two of them were built into the wall and therefore if not immovable, certainly impossible to transport under the circumstances. The third, however, fulfilled the demands and description of the Serbian engineer at Cevo. It was a smaller, compact set, supplied with straps on both sides so that two men could carry it. Barrett made sure that the requisite number of valves was present and that it was in perfect working condition. Then he searched the built-in steel cupboards along one wall until he found boxes with spare valves. He loaded six of them on the shoulder of one of his men and then proceeded to wreck the whole place methodically. A few blows created half a dozen short circuits, and he did not

pause until he was sure that he had done the maximum possible damage.

He paused for a moment to survey the wreckage and explain to the remaining two men how carefully they must handle the portable transmitter. His plan had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams—all but the small matter of crossing the sea to the mainland and carting his booty over the mountains to Draza Michailovitch's headquarters. . . .

No one hampered their retreat. They had lost two men killed and one wounded; but even the latter was a walking casualty. Barrett had some trouble in restraining the doughty fishermen from killing all the unconscious Italians; the best pretext he could find was that they should not waste time. In spite of the heavy load they had to carry—for the Korcula people had helped themselves liberally from the small arms arsenal they found in the underground passages of the tower—they made good speed down to the coast.

The boats were there, thank God—and a grinning, grimy Paddy rose from the beach to greet Stephen with an exaggerated Fascist salute.

"What happened?" asked Barrett, while he gave curt orders to put all the arms, ammunition and the wireless equipment into Lazar's "flying" motor-boat.

"Faith, we had some fun," murmured Paddy. "One of the sticks exploded against the wall of their munitions dump—where they keep torpedoes and such-like nasty things. There were no submarines in dock though," he added regretfully.

"All four of you back safely?" enquired Stephen.

"I came back alone," said the Irishman. "They were brave lads—all three stopped bullets. I was lucky."

He staggered and would have fallen if Barrett had not caught him.

"Paddy, what the . . ."

"A piece of debris hit me . . . it's nothing but my shoulder. I'll be all right, Lothario . . ."

And he lost consciousness.

Stephen gently placed him in one of the fishing-boats. Eve and Count Martin were already in it. The tow-ropes were made

fast. Father Milivoj wanted to climb into Barrett's boat, but the Englishman stopped him.

"You go into Lazar's boat, Father," he said. "If anything should happen, you can cast off the tow-ropes and get away. . . . Without you and your men we could never get this stuff to Cevo."

"But if they catch you . . ." the priest protested.

"They can't do worse to us than to you. Perhaps less. You don't speak Italian, do you?"

"God forbid!" the good father exclaimed piously.

"I do. And therefore I have a better chance. Go on."

With some difficulty they launched the boats and Lazar's engine sprang to life with an unexpected roar. At the same moment a ragged volley of rifle-fire broke out behind them—but it was too dark and their attackers were too far to shoot accurately.

The tow-lines tautened and they shot away from the beach. For once Lazar's boast that his boat could fly was almost justified. But the prospect did not become rosier by this speedy start. Even with the best will the motor-boat could not make more than three or four knots—because it had to tow two heavily laden fishing-boats and about two dozen swimmers. Unless they were incredible bunglers, the Italians would pick up their trail. If they had planes and they dropped a few flares . . .

It was Eve who heard it first . . . the sound of engines behind them. Another motor-boat . . . probably one of the powerful Isottas in which the Italians took such pride—in the rare cases when they did not run from British guns. But there were no guns in Lazar's "invention", only a single machine-gun and some rifles. . . .

For the time being their pursuer was far astern. Barrett shouted across to Lazar to make all speed possible, and the inventor, his hair flying wildly in the stiff breeze, shouted back a reply of encouragement. But the noise of the pursuing craft became louder and louder every minute.

The other fishing-boat was a yard or so behind, and Barrett saw that the fishermen were trying to hoist the single mast and unfurl the sail. They were very crowded and found it a diffi-

cult job, but succeeded in the end. Then one of them crawled forward with a knife in his teeth and started to hack at the tow-line. It was clear suicide, for they certainly could not outsail the torpedo-boat, though they might be able to slip away in the darkness.

"What's going on?"

It was Paddy, sitting up and taking notice.

"There's someone on our tail," Count Martin replied.

"And we are running away from them? What a shame!" grumbled Paddy. "Let's turn and give fight."

"They would blow us to smithereens," said Stephen.

"One of the boats has struck out on its own—what about doing the same?"

Apart from Eve, Count Martin, Barrett and Paddy, there were seven fishermen in the boat. Stephen repeated his suggestion in Serbian. The men nodded silently.

They put up the mast and fixed the sail. All the time the vicious purring was coming nearer. The wind was north-east—rather favourable, for it would blow them towards the mainland and possible safety. If only . . .

The last strands of the tow-rope parted. They saw the motor-boat leap forward, freed of its hampering burden. Only the four ropes with the heads of the swimmers trailed behind it, and the men had some difficulty in keeping above water in the rising swell. But they were all fishermen and they would not drown as long as there was an ounce of strength left in their bodies. They were only three miles from Korcula . . . but Korcula was just as dangerous as the Canale di Lagosta.

Suddenly Barrett shouted at Count Martin:

"Tie me up!"

"What?" The Count did not believe his ears.

"I said, tie me up!"

"But why . . ."

"Don't ask questions! Tie me up! Here, let me . . ."

He peeled off his coat, went quickly through his trouser pockets, tousled his hair and transformed himself within a minute into a most disreputable-looking tramp. The coat he weighted with a piece of iron he found in the bottom of the

boat. Then he held out his arms and repeated for the third time:

"Tie me up, Martin! Hurry! It's the only hope if we can't escape them. . . ."

They could see now the wake of the torpedo-boat which passed them. It was a largish vessel with a wicked-looking gun on the wheel-house deck.

"Tell the helmsman to tack!" shouted Barrett, while Count Martin and Eve were busy tying him up with some stout rope. "And don't treat me so gently! You must tie me up completely . . . not a make-believe, please!"

His friends had learned in the past months that there was system in his madness—otherwise they would not have obeyed his fantastic request. The boat tacked and swung about, running close to the wind. As far as they could make out, the other fishing-boat had vanished and Lazar's "pride" was still well ahead of its pursuer.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Stephen urged the others, and they worked with swift fingers, knotting and pulling. Scarcely had they finished, and Barrett had become a helpless package well-wrapped, when he raised his head and began to scream at the top of his voice. He screamed for help in Italian. It was a most creditable performance—any tenor at the Scala would have envied it. And it went on for quite a long time, though in between Stephen whispered to Count Martin: "Clap your hand on my mouth! Now! Let me go! Again!"

Now silenced, now screaming again, he strained his ears all the time. And suddenly his heart gave a leap. The noise of the torpedo-boat, which had been diminishing all the time as she forged ahead, began to grow stronger once more. A shot was fired and then, while the fishing-boat tacked and tacked, the Italians came nearer and nearer.

"I hope you know what you're doing," growled Paddy, and this time there was no banter in his voice.

Stephen took a deep breath and screamed again. Then he began to whisper in jerky sentences, desperately trying to say everything he wanted before their pursuers caught up with them.

"Listen. You three know Italian. Don't let them ques-

tion the others—always speak up for them, before they can open their mouths. Am trying to spin a tall story. Perhaps successful. Play up to me. Don't show surprise. Paddy, keep straight face. I . . . Here they come. Show some fight but not too much. . . ."

The torpedo-boat swung round and came upon them from the south-east. It fired a single shot across their bows and they stopped. It was difficult to bring the two boats alongside in the rough sea, but the Italians showed quite remarkable seamanship and achieved it. Then the fishing-boat was made fast with grappling hooks and half a dozen sailors jumped across. Barrett was sitting up in the stern, shouting in a high-pitched, hysterical voice how happy he was to be rescued, and what dire things he would do to these unspeakable swine who had treated him abominably. Soon he was freed and the others trussed up. Then the prisoners were transferred to the torpedo-boat—a ticklish operation—and the fishing-smack was abandoned to drift.

Paddy, Count Martin and Eve were watching Stephen Barrett with well-concealed admiration. Their faces, with various degrees of success, attempted to express only disgust and hate—but never had they been so proud of their association with this wiry, brown-skinned man than at this moment when he was playing a desperate game with their lives as the stake.

They were sitting on a hard bench in the Korcula OVRA office while Stephen, in a white linen suit, was facing Signor Gerosa across a dilapidated desk.

Not only his suit had changed; his whole bearing, appearance, his gestures and his eyes—even his voice. Gone were the drawling, soft tones, the reserved manner which an Englishman seldom discards. He was completely the Latin, mercurial, vivacious—the way he fidgeted on the chair, caressed his moustache, emphasized each sentence with a flick of his hands—if they had not witnessed the transformation, the Ragged Guard adventurers would have scarcely recognized him.

But all the while Stephen Barrett was playing his part with consummate artistry, his brain was working overtime. He had

sized up Signor Gerosa, head of the local OVRA office, very quickly. He was youngish, fat and indolent—but he was not a fool. And before a certain Heinrich Himmler had organized the Gestapo, the OVRA had been the most efficient secret police in the whole of Europe. There were only two things which promised hope—the first that Stephen Barrett knew a great deal more about the OVRA, its leaders and organization, than any Englishman or non-Italian was supposed to know—the second that Father Milivoj and the precious cargo of Lazar's boat had not yet been found by the Italians.

He talked glibly, yet not too glibly, watching his opponent keenly, trying to penetrate the mask of soft, pudgy flesh. He must play for time—yet not too much time, for his bluff was only a local one . . . it would never stand up to the scrutiny of Rome.

“ . . . I am certainly sorry that I hadn't the great, the inestimable pleasure of meeting you before I went off to South America, Signor Gerosa. You were on home duty all the time? No? Oh, Syria. That must have been interesting. Well, as I told you, I got back two months ago and was sent straight off to that god-forsaken place, Montenegro . . . ”

He had to make his story plausible and not too complicated. He had already won the first round when he gave the correct recognition signal which all OVRA agents were taught. He had cautiously mentioned one or two names, well above Signor Gerosa, in the hierarchy of Mussolini's secret police, referring to them with respectful familiarity, and hinting at even higher “contacts”. He also dropped one or two hints about connections with the Gestapo—an organization of which he knew a vast deal—though he knew that heads of the OVRA hated their German colleagues. Still, Himmler was just as much master in Italy as in Germany, and it would do no harm to stress his imaginary acquaintance with Heydrich, Bohle, Von Epp and the other smooth gangsters of Adolf's mob.

“It was a difficult trip,” he continued, “and I ran considerable risks before these Serbian swine would accept me as one who shared their wicked intentions. But in the end they did. I attended their councils, I knew their secrets, I was given insight into their dark designs. My dear colleague, how

often I had to smother my instincts which were crying out all the time: get up and denounce them! Tell them that *Il Duce* is the friend of their people and only base ingratitude could plot against him! But what would you have, Signor Gerosa?" and Stephen opened his hands with a gesture of futility so accomplished that Paddy would have liked to applaud if he had not been handcuffed. "They would have torn me to pieces . . . for they are little better than wild beasts!"

Wisely, Barrett had decided to stick to the truth as far as it was possible. Thus he related the plan of getting a transmitter from Lagosta, the journey across the mountains and the arrival on Korcula—though he suppressed Radovan's name and pretended that he did not know the identity of the conspirators on the island.

"Then came last night," he continued, and his voice sank to a dramatic whisper. "By then this man," and he pointed a shaking finger at Paddy who shrunk back against the wall, "this scoundrel had begun to suspect me. I tried to slip out from their hiding-place and warn my compatriots, but they watched me all the time like hawks and would have murdered me without compunction. I was forced to go with them on their villainous errand. I was horrified, but I could not help it. . . ."

Briefly he related the events on Lagosta which must have been familiar to Signor Gerosa—certainly familiar enough to cause him a headache or even worse.

"I saw them destroy the radio station . . . I saw them collect those precious code-books . . . and carry away the transmitter. Then I tried to run away and tell my story to the proper authorities. But they noticed my intention, stopped me, bound me and dragged me into their boat. . . . I was gagged, but gradually I worked the gag loose. You can imagine my boundless joy when I noticed that liberation was at hand. Though they almost killed me, I kept on shouting until I succeeded in attracting the attention of our gallant sailors!"

Exhausted, he leaned back and dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. Signor Gerosa nodded sympathetically.

"It must have been a very trying time for you, Signor

Castelli. And so unfortunate that while our men rescued you and captured these assassins, the boat with the code-books and the stolen apparatus escaped. . . ."

"Unfortunate?" Stephen snapped up the word immediately. "Perhaps yes . . . perhaps no, Signor Gerosa. It depends whether you act quickly enough to snatch glory from disaster. Of course, it is my task, too . . . for my mission doesn't end until this pest of Serbian resistance has been completely eradicated."

One of his major cards was the choice of Castelli as his "pseudonym". Signor Carlo Castelli was very much a real personality—at the moment safely behind bars in a Cairo military prison. Stephen had a brief contact with the case and had to acknowledge that Carlo Castelli had been a crack agent of the OVRA who only got caught because an Arab girl with whom he had become entangled denounced him in a fit of jealousy. He had a superficial resemblance to Stephen himself, and as he had vanished completely from the ken of the Italian Secret Service, it seemed to be safe enough to adopt his personality. The only danger was that Gerosa might have known him; but the OVRA shared the methods of all other secret police in keeping its agents well apart unless the contrary was unavoidable, and therefore this seemed to be a reasonable risk to take.

"Well, what do you propose to do?" grunted Gerosa, for the first time showing signs that he was accepting Barrett's bona fides.

"There is one person in this very room who can lead us to the hiding-place of the bandits!" cried Stephen dramatically.

"Oh! And who is it?" enquired Gerosa, his little pig's eyes blinking.

"That woman!" and Barrett pointed at Eve. "Her lover is the leader of the assassins! And if you give me fifteen minutes alone with her, I am sure I can persuade her to give us all the help we want!"

He bent forward, leering. At this moment he was the Dago of all Dagoes, lascivious, vulgar, slippery. "I think I have a little influence with her," he said, and winked.

Signor Gerosa considered the matter in silence.

"You want fifteen minutes with her—alone?" he repeated.

"It would certainly expedite matters," explained Stephen with another wink. "But first, if you don't mind, I'd like to send off some cables . . . I have been out of touch with Rome for so long. . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," nodded Gerosa. He rang, and ordered the two soldiers who entered to take the prisoners back to their cells. They marched out stiffly, and Paddy managed to put on a ferocious scowl when he passed Barrett's chair. Count Martin, on the other hand, seemed to take the monstrous slandering of his wife without batting an eyelid. Eve's face was a tragic mask. Yes, all three were playing up to their leader magnificently—Stephen only hoped that this comedy would not be in vain.

"Now," said the OVRA man when the door closed behind them, "if you give me the cables, I'll have them coded and we can send them off. . . ."

"If you don't mind," smiled Barrett, at his most ingratiating, "I was given a special code which I carry in my head. I'd prefer to send off the cables myself." Then, believing that the best course was utter impudence, he added: "By the way, I hate to bother you—but I'll need some money. Alas, as you know, I lost everything at the hands of these scoundrels. I must buy a few things. Oh, I think five hundred lire will be ample. Of course I'll give you a receipt. Then—I'll be back in an hour at the latest. Perhaps by that time you can arrange my private interview with this woman. I'll make a special point of mentioning your most helpful co-operation in my cables. *Grazie*, Signor Gerosa!"

The fat man blinked, opened his mouth and closed it again. Then he took five one-hundred-lire notes from his wallet and thrust them across the table. Barrett's heart skipped a beat. He had won the second round.

He gave the Fascist salute jauntily and strolled from the room.

It was comparatively easy to shake off the "shadow" whom Gerosa had set on his trail. The only difficulty about it was that it had to be done without betraying the fact he wanted

to get rid of the lumbering, heavy-limbed agent who had followed him from the OVRA building.

He succeeded in losing him at the post office, where he sent off three cables to three Rome addresses, all of which were genuine though they had nothing to do with the OVRA. The text was completely meaningless, but as he did not include the sender's name and address, at the worst they might cause some mystification to the addressees, two of whom were antique dealers while the third ran a tourist bureau. Stephen remembered them from his last Rome visit, just after Italy had entered the war.

As soon as he was free of Gerosa's man, he made his way to the Cathedral. It was almost empty except for two old women praying in front of the main altar. Stephen found a confessional box and pulled the frayed rope which was to summon the priest.

A minute or so later a head appeared in the opening of the box.

"Yes, my son?" a gentle voice asked in Serbian.

"Listen, Father," Stephen started, "I am a friend of your people. I am in great trouble. I must get in touch immediately with Father Milivoj."

"For what purpose?"

"I cannot explain. I . . ."

Quickly he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and tore off its edges to make it ragged. Then he pushed it towards the priest. It was a desperate chance—but it might work. There was a short pause while the father confessor thoughtfully fingered the torn square of linen.

"I see," he said at last. "Will you wait here? I'll fetch Father Milivoj. . . ."

Was it a trap? Stephen waited, tense. But now a dark, indistinct shape moved forward in the confessional box and he heard Father Milivoj's familiar voice:

"You? How did you get here?"

"No time to explain now. Listen: I am trying to arrange for the others to be taken to Ston to-night. You must let Radovan know—they should prepare a surprise attack on the Italian escort on that narrow neck of land where we crossed

the other night. I'll do everything to get there just after nightfall. If we are not at the spot by dawn, I have failed. Then I'll leave to you what to do, though I doubt if you'll be able to do much. What happened to the stuff we took from Lagosta? "

" It's on its way to the mountains," Father Milivoj replied. " They've crossed to Neum without much difficulty."

" I am certainly glad to hear that," confessed Barrett. " And now I must go, Father. Don't forget—Radovan must be warned."

" Have no fear, my son. May God bless you and keep you safe! "

He touched Stephen's forehead lightly—then he was gone and the confessional box was empty.

Barrett waited a few minutes before he rose and left the Cathedral. Outside, noticing the flustered " shadow " looking up and down the square, he resisted a strong impulse to go up and say " boo! " to him.

He returned to Signor Gerosa's headquarters.

" Have you settled all your business? " asked the OVRA man.

" No . . . I am afraid I had no time left to buy the things I wanted. Never mind, they can keep till to-morrow," replied Stephen. " Have you arranged that interview for me? "

" Yes," nodded the pudgy Italian. " She is waiting for you in the next room."

Half an hour later Barrett was back in front of Gerosa's desk. These thirty minutes were among the most difficult of his life. He had to play the part of the bully for the benefit of Signor Gerosa, who was certainly eavesdropping. He had to get the appropriate replies out of Eve who, however quick-witted she was, could not always follow his lead promptly. And, as a third task, Stephen had to tell Eve what he planned for the same night and how she was to behave. He could not even whisper about this, and Eve knew no Morse. So, while he stormed and raged at her and she answered haltingly, his fingers wrote quick words on the tawdry mirror hanging on the wall. Again and again he had to breathe on it to cloud

its surface until Eve nodded that she understood and would do her part.

The rest was comparatively easy. Having gone so far, Signor Gerosa could not draw back. He might have had his doubts about this slick, persuasive colleague who dropped from the blue—but Stephen gave him no time to crystallize his doubts. A strong escort was selected, and Gerosa did not even jib at Stephen's request that all the prisoners taken last night should be allowed to accompany Eve.

"They would never believe that she escaped alone and we couldn't catch them," he explained. "But you can keep them covered and bag the whole gang. Don't forget the code-books! It would cause infinite trouble if they were lost. I undertake personal responsibility for the whole affair—though of course I would like you to come along, too. . . ."

But here, it seemed, their opinions differed. Signor Gerosa preferred to direct matters from the background. An office desk was the right place for the class of brains he possessed, not the rough-and-tumble of a possible pitched battle. "Captain Aldini," he said, "is a very reliable man. You'll find that he can handle all the technical details. It seems to be a somewhat risky business, but then you know what you are doing . . . I suppose. . . ."

When all the details had been arranged Gerosa rose, went to the door and opened it to make sure that no one was behind it. Then, after a nervous cough, he said:

"I am sure, my dear Castelli, that you have found no fault with my co-operation. . . ."

"Oh, none at all!" Barrett hastened to assure him. "You have been most helpful. . . ."

"Well then, you won't think it an imposition if I ask you a slight favour?"

He stopped, evidently embarrassed, and Stephen made an encouraging noise, wondering what was to follow.

"You see . . . this morning I learned that one of my enemies, a most disagreeable man, has denounced me to our superiors. Without the slightest ground, he has accused me of irregularities . . . bribery and corruption and similar fantastic charges . . . just because I helped someone who was

in difficulties through no fault of his own. I confess that he showed his gratitude by a small gift . . . but it was really nothing, a mere trifle . . . and yet there are always wicked men who twist such things into a monstrosity. As you seem to have such good connections in Rome, I thought . . . if you would put in a good word for me . . . I mean, would you give me a . . . a sort of testimonial . . . with the right people? "

Barrett solemnly promised him that he would. Then he excused himself hastily, saying that he was still feeling the exhaustion of these last few harassing weeks and needed some rest. Gerosa had given him a bedroom in the OVRA building which was comfortable if not too clean, and there Stephen stretched himself on the bed, laughing silently. It tickled his sense of humour that the man he had duped so successfully—he hoped—should ask him for patronage. Unless he was very much mistaken, after this affair was over Signor Gerosa would find himself either in prison or on the Lipari Islands. But it was a bit of luck, too. It explained why the fat OVRA man was so easily impressed by his glib story. With this threat of a serious charge hanging over his head and a guilty conscience, he could not afford to run foul of a successful and apparently influential colleague. With a pious prayer that no hitch should occur with Radovan, Stephen closed his eyes and instantly fell asleep.

It was almost too easy. Paddy, at least, who wore his arm in a sling, would have preferred a more serious scrap. But except for Captain Aldini and his sergeant, none of the Italians put up a stiff resistance when Radovan's men fell upon them. On the contrary, they showed a praiseworthy zeal to put the greatest possible distance between themselves and their attackers.

The plan which Stephen had "sold" Gerosa was simple. He had explained that by his personal influence he could persuade Eve to lead the Italian soldiers to the lair of her mythical "lover", where they would find not only the men responsible for the outrage on Lagosta but also the code-books and the arms they had stolen. The little comedy which Eve and he

played in the room next to Gerosa's had served its purpose well. Nor had Gerosa questioned the wisdom to take the other prisoners along in order to disperse any suspicion the Serbian "bandits" might entertain if they saw her approach alone.

Stephen and the prisoners were a few dozen yards ahead of their escort when the attack materialized. Instantly most of the Italians fled and it was easy to overpower the Captain and the sergeant. They were trussed up like birds and carried to Radovan's cellar. This time Zdravo was *not* discouraged from being playful.

Eve and Count Martin smiled at each other rather tremulously. It was difficult to realize that their rescue had been so easy and quick—even if it had cost Stephen all his ingenuity. Radovan was still outside with his men, trying to round up the Italians. Paddy was maintaining morosely that he would have preferred a "decent fight". And Barrett, perhaps for the first time in his life, felt exhausted in his relief.

"We must push on," he said when they had rested a little. "Sooner or later Signor Gerosa will start wondering about what has happened to me, and when he finds out Signor Gerosa will be a very angry man. . . ."

A week later the adventurers of the Ragged Guard were once more facing General Draza Michailovitch. The new War Minister of Jugoslavia had moved his headquarters from Cevo to the mountain fortress of Koprivnik, not far from the Albanian frontier. But otherwise everything was the same: the ragged, eager army camping in caves and on mountain slopes, the farmers and artisans who were following them to work for the sake of freedom; the Ragged Guard members of half a dozen nationalities who had forsaken their old loyalties to make common cause against the arch-enemy; the score or so of keen young airmen, for ever tinkering with their motley squadron of planes.

"The transmitter has arrived," the General told them, and in his quiet voice there was admiration and praise, full compensation for the danger and hardship Barrett and his friends had endured. "So have the code-books. Apparently the

Italians have not yet realized their loss, for we intercepted several of their messages and have profited by them greatly."

"I am glad, sir," Stephen said simply.

Michailovitch smiled.

"But I am afraid your travels are not over yet. When you have rested a little, you'll have to start again."

"Fine," remarked Paddy. "I like tourist life."

"I want you to go to London," the General said.

"London?" cried Paddy in evident dismay. "But I find this country much more interesting. If you forgive me, General, I'd much prefer to stay. This is the greatest story of my life, and exclusive, too. I am not going to miss it—unless you send me away in irons. . . ."

The General's keen, dark eyes turned questioningly to Count Martin and Eve.

"We would also like to stay with you, General," the young Hungarian spoke up. "You may have noticed that the number of Magyars in your remarkable army is growing daily. They are coming in hundreds across the frontier. If you would permit me to organize them into a brigade, we could do some useful work. . . ."

"Winter will be a hard and bitter season here in the mountains," Michailovitch said. "Your wife . . ."

"I want to share my husband's lot, whatever it is," Eve answered, and the quiet finality of her voice left little doubt of her tenacity.

The General turned to Barrett who was looking a little uncomfortable.

"It seems that all my friends have deserted me," he smiled.

"But if you want me to go, sir . . ."

"Yes, someone has to go to London and I can think of no better emissary than yourself," Michailovitch answered. "First of all because you have been with us for some length of time and know very well what we need and how badly we need it. Planes, guns, ammunition, medical supplies. I'll go into the details with you later. Secondly because you are an Englishman and no one will suspect you of exaggeration or untruth. I don't like losing you, to be quite frank—but when spring comes we need much more than we have now. The

Russians are hard-pressed, though they'll break yet the backbone of the *Wehrmacht*. We must have Britain's help. And if we have it nothing can stop us. Hitler thought that he had killed Yugoslavia when his army marched into Belgrade. His knowledge of history was always his weakness—it might prove his undoing. We have fought in exile before—now we are in our own country. And how we can fight, you have seen yourself."

"I'll tell them in London, sir. Though perhaps my descriptive powers are not great enough for such a task. . . ."

"Very well then, my friend. We'll arrange your trip as far as we can. But we can talk about all this to-morrow. I'll leave you now to the company of your friends. . . ."

They had climbed the mountain and stood looking down on the camp with its tents, dug-outs and small, well-camouflaged fires. The evening was soft and warm, yet the tang of autumn was already in the air.

It was Paddy who broke the silence.

"Give my love to the old man in Whitehall," he said. "And don't forget the barmaid in the 'Rainbow'—I mean that redhead with the dimples. I hope she's still there. . . ."

No one disturbed his apparently pleasant musings about the charms of the dimpled barmaid. Count Martin and Eve stood side by side, their fingers intertwined. Barrett, too, was silent. But at last he spoke.

"I never liked less the idea of seeing London. . . . Not because it won't be a good thing to have a lager in the 'Shepherd' or walk down Fleet Street. . . . But I have seen here something which I will never forget . . . and it would be so fascinating to watch it a little bit longer. . . ."

"What *did* you see?" asked Eve softly.

"Something tremendous," cried Stephen, for once forgetting his habitual reserve. "I saw how an idea . . . an abstract idea, mind you . . . can be stronger than age-old prejudices and inhibitions. I saw the death of half a dozen nations, the extinguishing of their honour and self-esteem, the trampling down of their finest possessions—and I saw the birth of something new. Perhaps a new Europe—perhaps a new world. If

these Slovaks and Bulgars, these Rumanians and Hungarians, these Serbs and Croats can fight and kill and die together, side by side, discarding all the burdens of the past—surely they can work and build and live together in the days to come! ”

“ Yes,” nodded Count Martin. “ The Ragged Guard is only a symbol of this new feeling. It is worthwhile to die if we can find understanding in the place of hate, collaboration in the place of discord. I have learned many things in these brief months. It needed the death of my Prime Minister to show me that there was something stronger and finer than brute force or cowardly compromise. Something which he possessed—and which Draza Michailovitch and his soldiers possess in full measure. . . . It will be a long road and a hard one . . . but who could doubt it that the end of it must be peace and happiness. . . . ”

“ Peace and happiness . . . ” sighed Eve. “ Yes . . . not for ourselves . . . this fight and suffering . . . but for the children who are born into this terrible world of to-day. We owe them so much . . . so much that life denied us. A world in which mothers must not tremble when their sons grow to manhood because the Moloch of War might demand their young bodies at any moment . . . when girls can dream of a home of their own with a man in the armchair in front of the fire. . . . Oh, Martin, we must never forget the children! ”

Her voice broke and the young Count put his arms around her with protective gentleness. Silence soothed them again. Down on the mountain slopes the little fires blinked and went out one by one. The September moon swam across the sky; the landscape was indescribably wild and beautiful.

And Stephen thought of the mountains, valleys and plains of Europe, the sleeping villages and uneasily stirring towns. Hate and cruelty were holding them in their grip like a legendary dragon. Peoples' dreams were haunted by violence and oppression. It seemed like a vast frozen continent, frozen in the icy blast of the *Herrenvolk's* disdainful tyranny.

Yet below the ice, the rigid rock, the smooth steel, the fires burned. Fires in the hearts of men and women, of half-mature youngsters and bearded grandfathers. They were isolated and puny . . . but there were millions of them. Soon,

very soon, they would begin to flame up and spread . . . and as they united one by one, they would melt the ice and send the flood roaring down towards the sea. Much it would destroy, even more it would sweep away—but the ice would vanish and the fires would burn freely again, warming those inside and beyond the frontiers; fires to give heat to all, sharing warmth freely, not dammed any longer by the narrow confines of any one country.

He shook himself, ashamed of his flights of fancy. He had never thought that he would indulge in such romantic imagery. Yet the magic of the mountain and the September moon was potent. He knew that he would never forget it—however he might deny its fascinating power.

Five weeks later Major Stephen Barrett was making his first verbal report to an old gentleman in a small, untidy room somewhere in Whitehall. He talked for almost two hours with little interruption from his one-man audience. The old gentleman, in fact, gave him a flattering amount of attention, though usually he was impatient of too much talk. Even so, Stephen found a number of details unworthy of mention. How he had slipped across the heavily guarded Yugoslav-Bulgarian frontier; how he had travelled across Bulgaria in three different, well-chosen disguises; how he outwitted the two Gestapo agents whom the Nazis set on his trail in Istanbul—all these were unimportant trifles in his eyes. But he spoke at length and with considerable enthusiasm about Draza Michailovitch, his army, the Ragged Guard and the thousands of nameless peasants, artisans, intellectuals, who were fighting against incredible odds and winning . . . winning because they did not know what defeat meant.

"You can put all this into writing later," the old man with the keen eyes said at the end of the two hours. "There are a few people to whom you have to tell your story first—and tell it exactly as you told me. . . ."

And so Major Stephen Barrett paid a few calls. He told his story to a man with a chubby face and a big cigar; to a handful of Slavs for whom every name he mentioned, every village or town he spoke of was a poignant reminder of their ravaged

motherland. And he told it to a young man in a blue uniform who received him in a Cambridge college, and whose eyes shone with pride when he heard about the courage of his people. He told it so often that in the end he found himself adding more and more to it as the memories of those crowded months thronged into his brain. He spoke of Dr. Milan Petrovitch and Ante Dobor, of young Danilo with his gaudy dagger and superb self-assurance, of Father Sava and Father Milivoj, of old Dragutin and his son-in-law—but he also spoke of Katona and Furka, of the Magyars, Slovaks, Czechs, Rumanians, Bulgars and all the other nationalities who had joined forces in the greatest struggle of their history. And as he spoke, he often forgot that he was in a London house—once again he swam in the underground cavern, puzzled over Count Lieven's mysterious death-message, grappled with Schwarzwolf in the swaying luggage-van. . . .

Once he dropped his handkerchief and the man to whom he was talking picked it up, staring curiously at its uneven edges.

"Have the mice been at you?" he joked.

"No," answered Stephen briefly. "This handkerchief has saved my life once or twice. I wouldn't wear a different one for anything in the world. . . ."

And suddenly, while his companion watched him with intense curiosity, he saw Eve's white fingers cutting the edge of the handkerchief to make it ragged. He hoped that she would not be disappointed—that her children would be born into a world for which peace and happiness had been gained by the Ragged Guard—and all the ragged guards of freedom whom not even the hosts of hell could overcome.

THE END

LONDON, *January-April* 1942

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